ピアノの森

一色まこと

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The Perfect World of KAI

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ISSHIKI Makoto

The Perfect World of KAI

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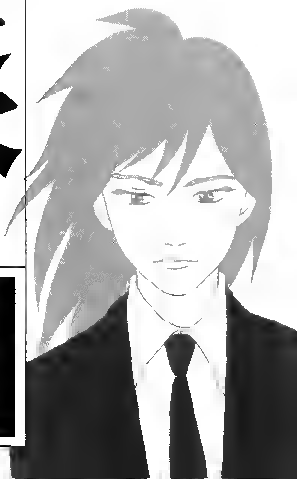

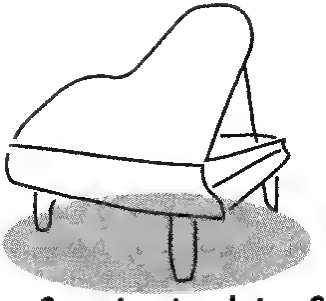

The Perfect World of KAI

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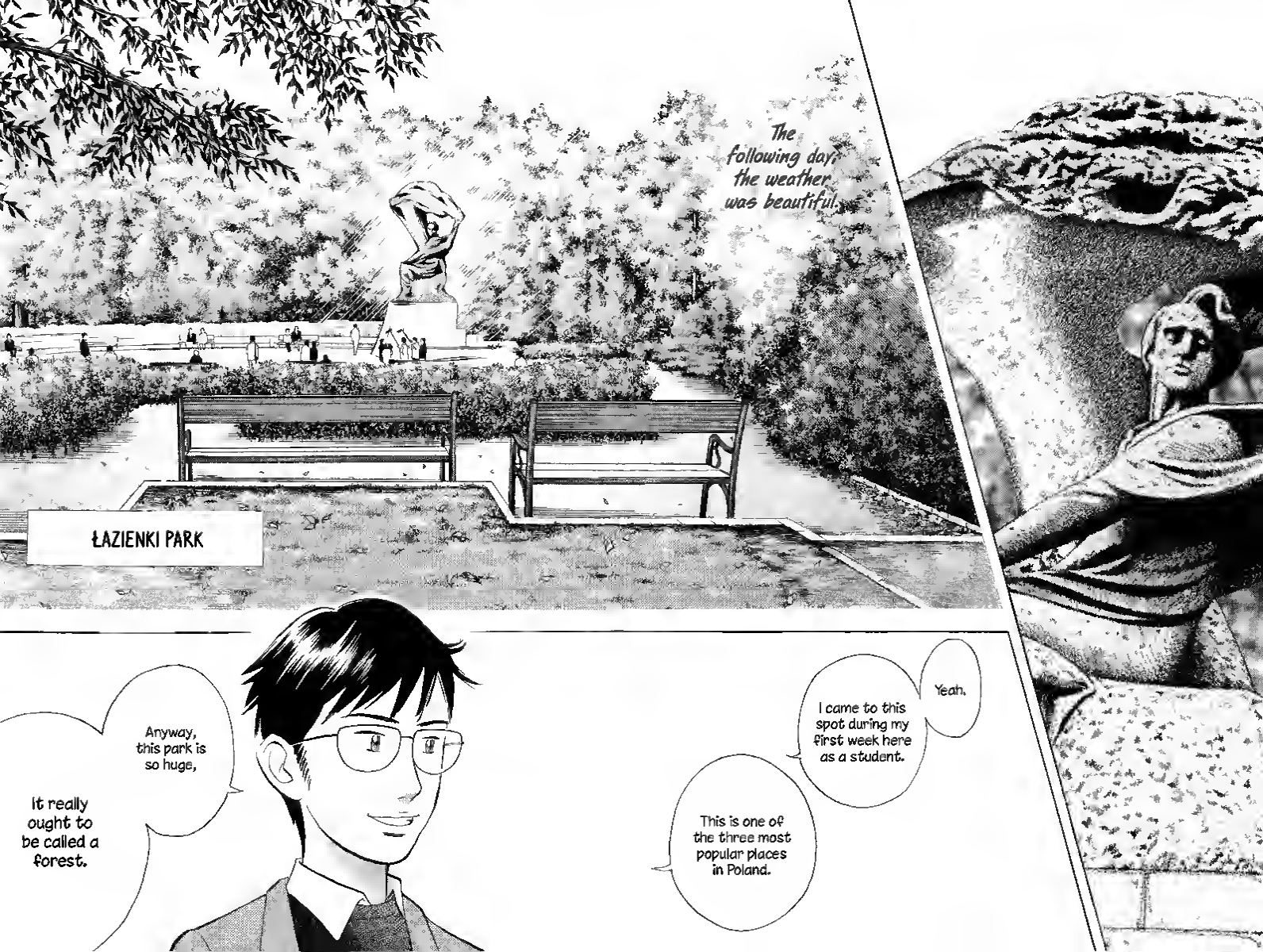

The following day, the weather was beautiful.
ŁAZIENKI PARK
Yeah.
I came to this spot during my first week here as a student.
This is one of the three most popular places in Poland.
Anyway, this park is so huge,
It really ought to be called a forest.

It was a sunny afternoon...
I've got lost in here a few times, actually.
We found ourselves...
...In the same forest.

Chapter 178

The Echoes Of Anger

I can give a noncommittal response with ease.
I've already gotten used to all these interviews and photographers.
Uh... Of course I was!
It was quite a surprise.
Were you shocked that you were eliminated?
Right now, I'm only thinking about moving forward.
Still, I have already come to terms with the results.

The results are already set in stone anyway.
I must accept it.
There's simply no other way.
Even though I can put on a mature act, I still can't really control my emotions.
I won't recover so easily.
But in terms of my feelings...
Do you have any regrets regarding this competition?
I really don't feel like doing this.
Why is this interview the day right after...

I think I did the best I possibly could.
No, nothing.
But did I, really?
I kept questioning my playing all night.
Well, many different thoughts tumbled around my head after the results were out.
Unfair.
I was finally able to play my own music... So why would that be my undoing?

I'm certain of that.
That is what Dad had wanted to say.
Maybe I would have made it through if I had just played the way I usually do.
...While listening to my performance.
He must have been in a turmoil of contradictory feelings...
I shouldn't have lost at this stage.
Our objective was to beat Kai Ichinose!

Eh?
...In any of the remaining contestants?
Have you taken a particular interest...
STAREEE

Especially Wei Pang, the winner of the Long-Thibaud Competition.
Lies!!
Ah... All of the finalists interest me.
I might forget I'm in the middle of doing an interview.
If I lose my focus...
My facial expression is getting stiff.
Ah... This is bad.
I am only interested in Kai's playing.
But since this is a TV interview, I have to stay composed all the time. It's exhausting.
I could slack off a bit if this was just a photoshoot for a magazine...

Moving right now is good.
I'm saved.
There's a pretty good spot back there, down the path.
Got it.
How about somewhere more scenic, maybe with falling red leaves?
Let's change the location!
Kai?
Are you sure it really is him?
Eh? Ichinose is here, you say?
Well it's worth a shot! I'm coming too!
Wanna ask him for an interview before we lose sight of him?

That's just the way it'll always be...
So Kai is here as well.
I've lost to Kai in a competition.
And this will happen again in the future...
I will only grow more and more conscious of his presence.

He will always be right there, one step ahead of me.
As long as I play the piano...
Shuhei-kun, do you have any plans?
It'd be great if you could join us for lunch...
Well then, that's it for today.
Thank you for your hard work!
Ah... I'm sorry.
I've got an interview with a magazine later.

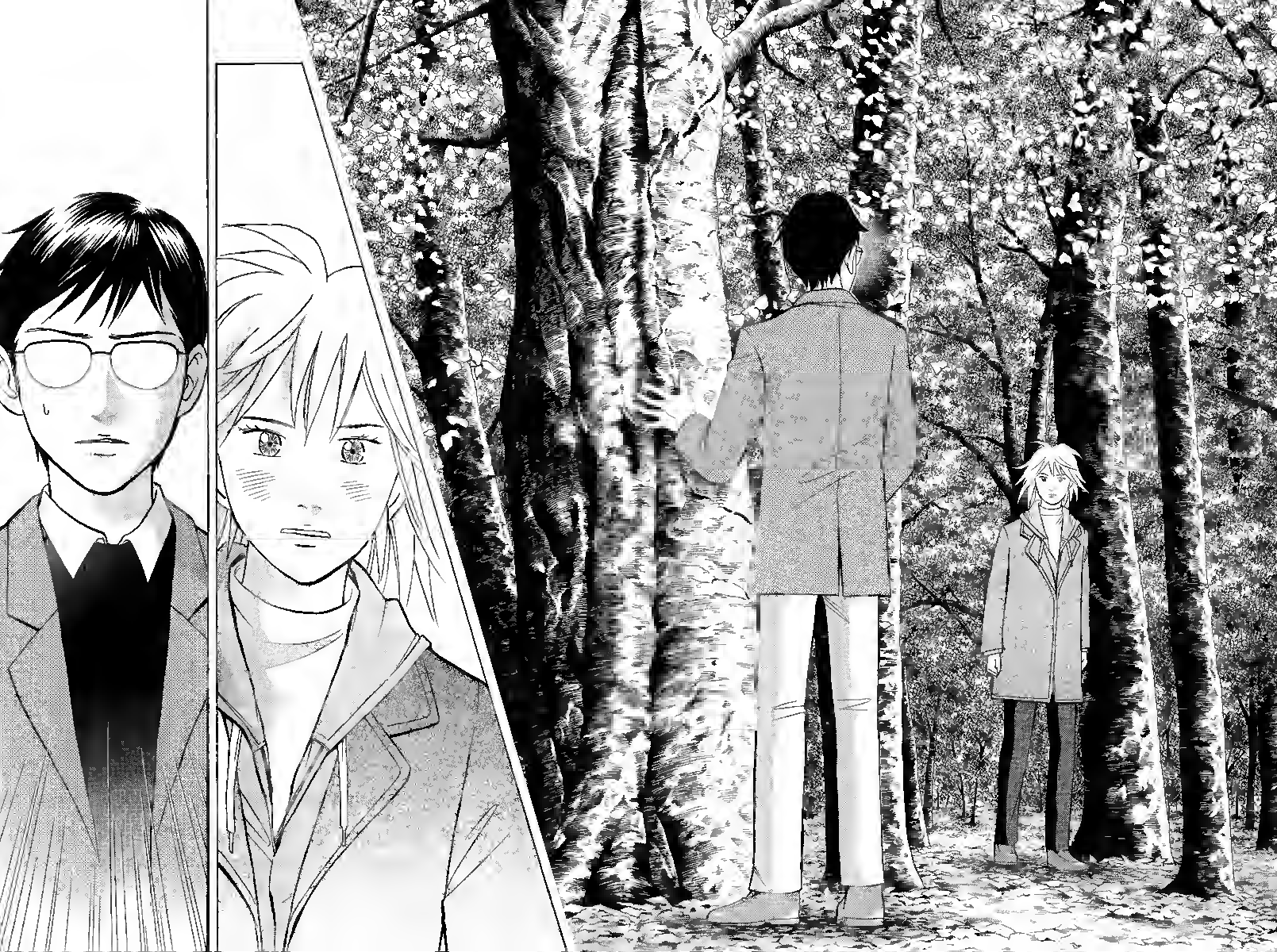
Eh... That must be tiring, but it also means that you must be quite the celebrity!
No, not at all!
Well then, thank you for today!
We'll see you again in five days!
Right!
See you then!
That's right, the documentary hasn't finished shooting yet.
They've just altered the content to "Follow-Up on the Defeated".
No good.
He said no?
Yeah, seems like he wasn't in the mood at all.
Ichinose-kun flatly refused all interviews and photoshoots.

Eh... Let's try asking again. Maybe he'll agree if we push him enough...
That's impossible. He's already given me the slip.
Eh... What do you mean?
You should be more persistent even if that might leave a bad impression. He'll be a rising star after this competition!
.....
This is so annoying.
Refusing interviews?
This must be a joke.
Ever since yesterday, I have been consumed...
...Not by grief or sorrow...
...But by anger.
Ever since that time...

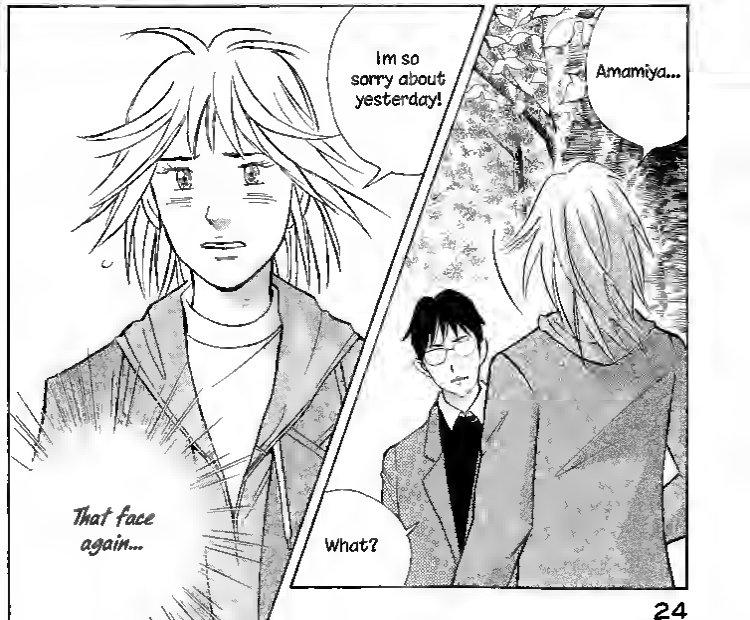
His smile back then...
He must've smiled at me because he was just being his usual clueless self. Somehow he didn't know the results.
It was the way his face fell after that...
He has always been perceptive. He probably knew the moment he saw my expression...

...That turned my sorrow into anger.
It was that stunned and speechless expression of Kai's...
Dammit!
...Be a laughed at or even criticized!!
I would much rather...

It's your sympathy that pissed me off the most!



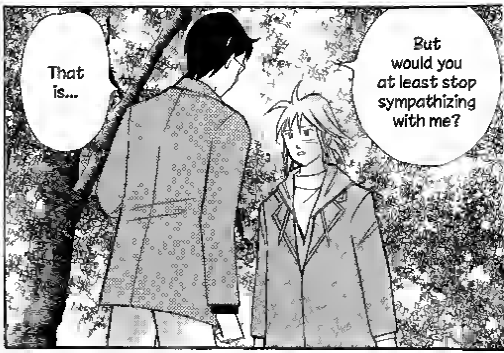
Talk about bad timing, Kai.
You've been popping up at the worst possible moment ever since yesterday.
A... Amamiya...

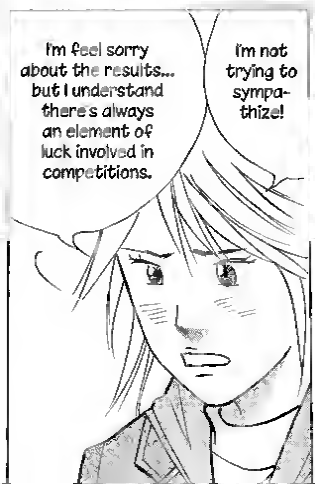

I'm so sorry about yesterday!
Amamiya...
That face again...
What?

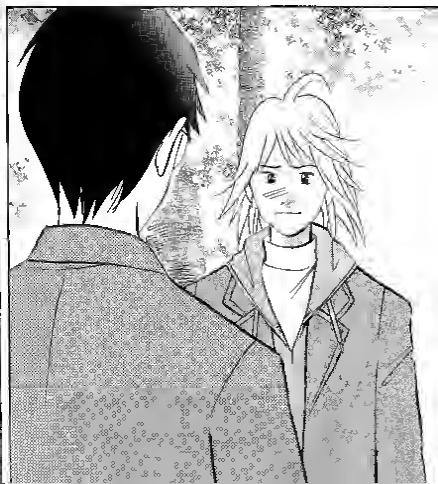
Smiles...
Ah...
You mean for being all smiles when I was eliminated?
I was an insensitive idiot!
I'm so sorry! I had no idea!
Hmm... I'm sure you weren't. That's just the way you are...
I wasn't thinking about winning or losing.
I deserve to be laughed at for losing like that.
No... There's no need for you to apologize.

All this time, my only intention has been to play the piano better than you.
But you have never seen me as your rival in the first place. I understand that much.

That is the one thing that angers me the most,
That hurts me the most.


But would you at least stop sympathizing with me?
That is...


I'm not trying to sympa-thize!
I'm feel sorry about the results... but I understand there's always an element of luck involved in competitions.

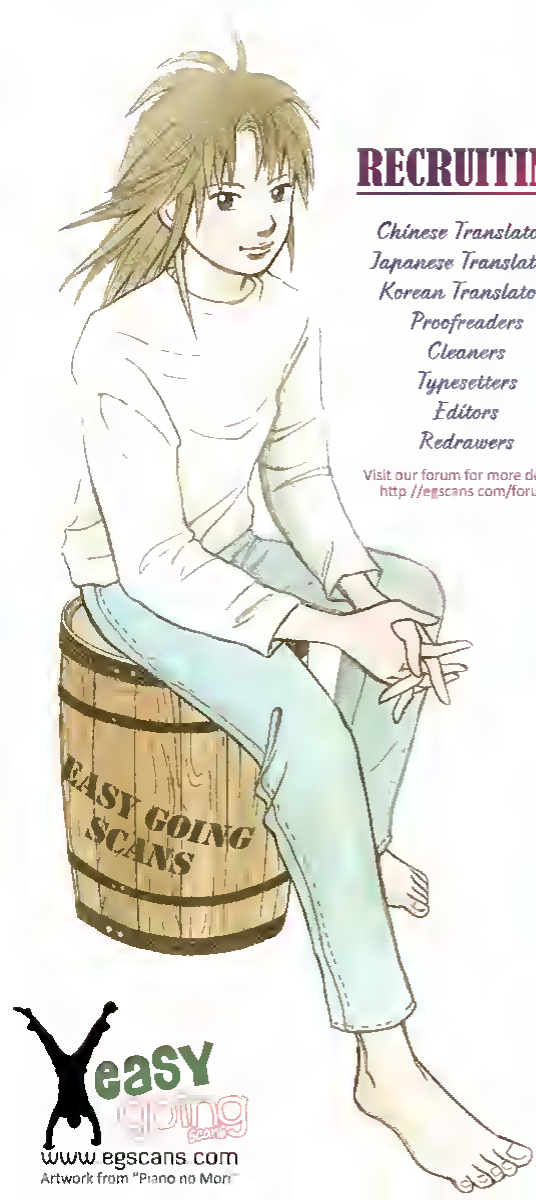


I only feel sorry because I genuinely love Amamiya's playing.
And besides, it's never been about winning or losing!
Your second performance... was played with a completely new style, right?
Stop it!
It really was a moving performance.
!
Shut up already!

Would you please stop trying to console the loser?
No! I'm not trying to console you!!
I'm telling the truth!!
Kai,
I said I don't want any of your sympathy.
You really are a good guy...

But right now... I want to go to a place where you don't exist.
No... I've probably always wanted that.
I'm sorry, Kai!

The Echoes Of Anger END



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Chapter 179

An Afternoon Spent in Self-Loathing

When putting on a "mature act" during the interview...?
My mouth feels dry. Is it because I've been sprouting nothing but lies...
I feel sick.
My throat is parched, as if I'd been swallowing dirt...
I'm sorry, Kai.
I...
As I try to retch out all that dirt...

I hate you.
I've hated you ever since elementary school.
I have always hated you...
...Start spewing the venom within me...

Ah...
Ever since that encounter...
I wish I had never met you.
I've always envied Kai's talent...
And I loathe myself for being so petty and egoistic.

You've brought out the worst of me.
And made me realize that...
I've only ever wanted to be a good person.
A nice guy...
I'm such a pathetic...
Pitiful piece of trash.
Though I have had my suspicions that those would be your true feelings,
I managed to convince myself otherwise.
I get it.

I'm the problem.
It's not your fault.
I'm sorry, Kai.
But now, I understand that you do hate me.
I really like you, and your music, Amamiya...
I...
...So why can't you see that you're also talented?
A... Amamiya, you have no trouble perceiving the talent of other people...
Kai, please. Enough...

Koi, I'm sorry, but I have to go...
This is really maddening...
I still have interviews with a few other magazines.
Bye.
I understand. See you then...
Ah...
Good luck with the finals.

Right.
Got it.

He actually cried! That's playing dirty!
He...
I hate Kai!
I...
But right now...
I really, really hate him!

...I hate myself even more!!

Not only is the dirt still stuck within me...
It hurts.
The dagger I flung at Kai...
It has actually increased.
My heart aches.
Has come back and stabbed me...

What should I do?!
What should I do, Father?

SOFITEL
VICTORIA

Is that so...
It really was a fine performance, what a shame...
That's right.
So Shuhei really was on the borderline.
...Point deductions would be the usual method.
But... In cases where the scores have to be reviewed...
But a surprising number of judges took mistakes very seriously...
In terms of musical interpretation, I would say Shuhei-kun did better.

Youichirou! Stop making Pavlos the scapegoat!
No, I'm not doing that.
That stupefied expression on Pavlos face when I pointed out the many mistakes in Shuhei's performance... He really is naïve isn't he...
Well I'm not surprised...
I think Pavlos has already tried his best to get Shuhei-kun into the finals.
It was right for you to put Shuhei-kun under his care.
He's a great teacher, you know.
The fact remains that Shuhei has been disqualified...
But who cares about Pavlos anymore.
It must be true if you say so.
All right, Kristina.

So... Where's Shuhei-kun today?
His schedule is filled with interviews from noon till night today.
I know he hasn't gotten back on his feet...
But he's used to interviews, and occupying himself might take his mind off things a bit...
Oh, how intense.
Is he doing all right? It must be awkward today...
Making him feel better, you know...
Holding him tight, helping him cope with the shock, and so on...
Comfort?
Then I suppose you've comforted him last night.
I see...

N...No...
I was also in shock last night... I wasn't able to sort things out myself.
I did not comfort Shuhei.
Eh?
Well... It's different for us... People from my country don't just casually hug each other...
But we did text each other.
And I plan to have a proper chat with him after going to the cathedral tonight.
That's right! We will take time and talk things out tonight...
Oh right... There's gonna be a Memorial Mass held in honor of Chopin!
Yeah.. I'm gonna meet up with Shuhei in the lobby of this hotel... I should get going...
Ring
Ah... Speak of the devil...
Excuse me for a bit...

Hello?
Eh? He didn't come?
No... Really? Maybe you missed each other...
...
Sorry about that!
Did something happen?

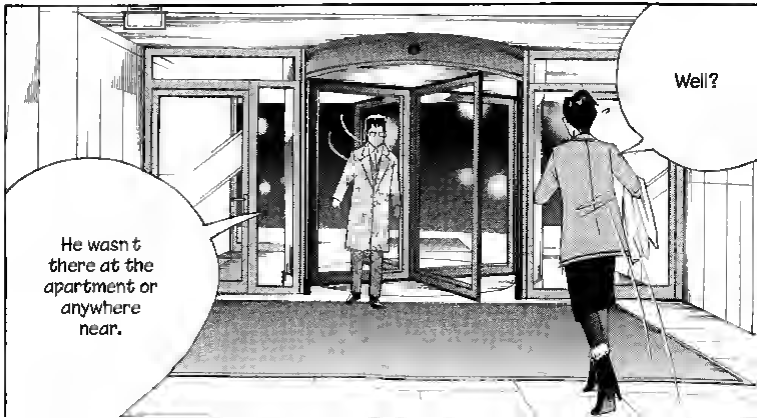
What's going on?
W..
They couldn't reach him no matter how many times they called.
Maybe he switched off his phone or the battery ran out.
Huh?
Shuhei didn't show up at the interviews.
I have not made Shuhei feel better...
Shuhei has...
Gone missing.
I haven't even given him a hug...

Thump Thump
What the...? Not again...
Click
Oh dear... So it's the dad today?
But if it's the dad, wouldn't he have a spare key?
Shuhei, you there?!
Shuhei!

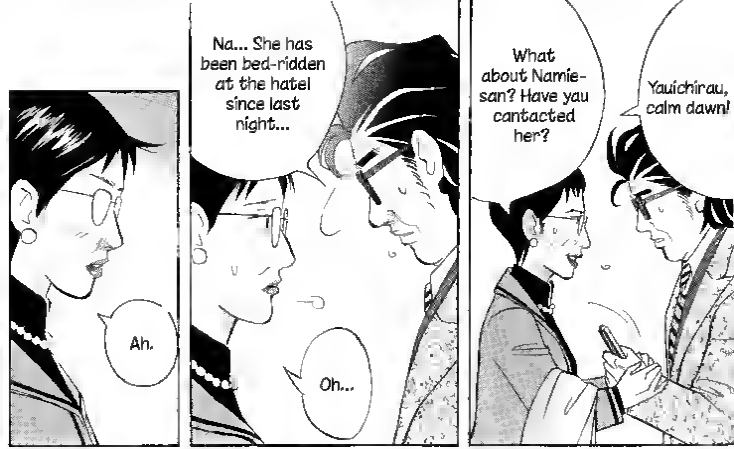
Shuhei...
But I have done nothing for Shuhei.
Regardless of the results... I should have encouraged him... praised him, told him he did well...

Why would he still be out at this hour...
Kai is late!
NASTROJ
He hasn't come back since he went to Chopin's Forest at noon...
My calls couldn't get through either...
It's a bit unusual for him to skip his lesson like this.
I hope nothing's wrong.
The final round is starting tomorrow...
As if!
So maybe he decided to skip his lesson to mourn Chopin in the forest?
Today is the anniversary of Chopin's death...

Anyway, let's head to the cathedral first...
instead of wasting time worrying here...
Since it's this late, perhaps Kai has already gone to the cathedral.
He did promise he would come to the ceremony!
Oh right!


Well?
He wasn't there at the apartment or anywhere near.

Maybe he just got tired of the interviews and ran away?
He wouldn't do something so irresponsible!
He never showed up!
How about here?
There's no way he would ditch the four remaining simple interviews...
And he'd already done the hardest documentary shooting.
10/16/23 02
Sorry, Father.
I couldn't keep our promise
Shuhei's message from last night came to my mind.
Don't tell me...
Don't tell me...


Ah.
Na... She has been bed-ridden at the hatel since last night...
Oh...
What about Namie-san? Have yau cantacted her?
Yauichirau, calm dawn!

W-What about the cathedral?
Let's go and find out!
I haven't done the slightest thing to make Shuhei feel better.
An Afternoon Spent in Self-Loathing END

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10/16/22 : 48

Will you be able to go to the interviews tomorrow?
You can decline if you want...

It's all right.

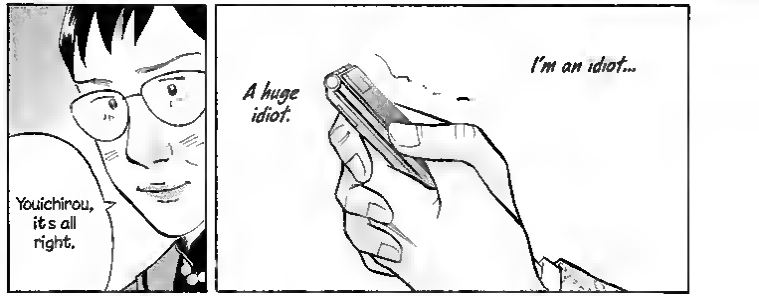
Sorry, Dad.

I couldn't keep our promise.

Either way, have a good rest today and then let's go to Chopin's Memorial Mass tomorrow!
I'm gonna wait for you in the hotel's lobby, so contact me when you're done with your interviews.

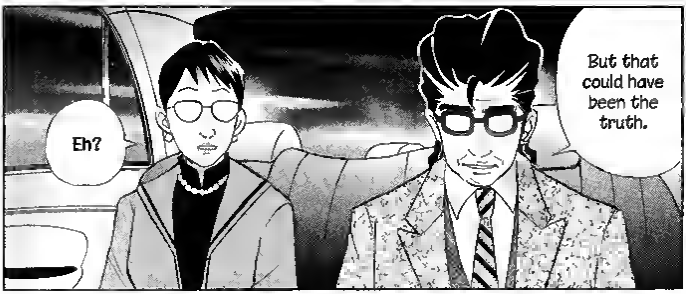
Got it.
Good night.

I haven't done the slightest thing to make Shuhei feel better.
Shuhei
10/16/23 11
Good night


Youichirou, it's all right.
A huge idiot.
I'm an idiot...

TAXI
Shuhei-kun must be at the cathedral.
If he isn't going, then he would definitely have called you.
I hope so...

I was just overthinking things! Sorry for accusing you.
Uh...
I...
I said that I wasn't trying to make him fight a "proxy war", but...


Eh?
But that could have been the truth.

The shock of being eliminated must have hit Shuhei the hardest.
But I didn't offer him any words of comfort...
I did not even try to help him deal with it.
I haven't given any thought to Shuhei's feelings.

Youichi-rou?
I...
I didn't make Shuhei my number one concern.
Everything is my...
W...When I start to think about it...
But to put it in another way...
Defeating Ichinose Kai would open the door for Shuhei's future...

I must have pounded this notion into him...
If Ichinose wins, then there'd be no future for Shuhei...
That's right.
It all started back then.
If you want to compete with him...
You, too, must step into the wider world.

If that's the case, Shuhei, your only option left...
Is to surpass Ichinose Kai.
Even right before the competition.
I kept reiterating that time and time again to him...
That's why I came to Warsaw.
That's exactly what I intend to do, father.
Perhaps it's just as you've said, I've been imposing huge responsibilities on Shuhei...
Kristina...

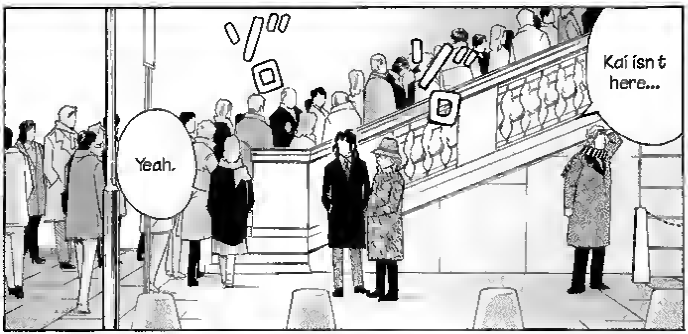
I...In order to release myself from the life-long curse of Aśino...
I've been pushing the things I could not achieve onto Shuhei.
I've been superimposing Aśino... onto his beloved student...
So as to stop myself from being plagued by the past...
I'm the worst.
I'm the worst father in the world.
You-ichi-rou...

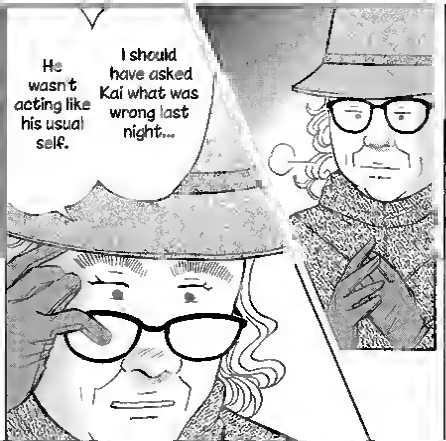
Nothing is going to happen to him.
He's got a bright future ahead of him.
If Shuhei...
If something happens to him, I...
pat
Pat
That is impossible.
clench
But I have distorted that future of his...
I believe people capable of playing such music wouldn't do something that stupid.
You don't get it, Youichirou, do you?
Haven't you heard his newly awakened piano playing?
As you are fully aware,
He is a pianist.

Most pianists might not get it...
But you should know this better than most people, Youichirou!
Once he's had a taste of that thrill, he will want to play again!
He won't be able to resist!
Ah...

That's how the piano is, right?

HOLY CROSS CHURCH


Kai isn't here...
Yeah.


He wasn't acting like his usual self.
I should have asked Kai what was wrong last night...

Will he come?
Maybe...

I'm just afraid that the damage is done and it might be too late...
I do agree with your laissez-faire* policy when dealing with Kai...
It's not really laissez-faire.
We could've helped him if he had any problem...
Or perhaps it was something he found difficult to bring up.

*LITERALLY "LET (THEM) ACT" IN FRENCH. I.E. NON-INTERFERENCE

Hello?
Buzzzz...
Ichinose
Got it, see ya!
.....
Right...
Ah...
Okay.
Oh...
No way. As if that could happen!
He said, "I had a stomachache in the forest, so I went looking for a restroom, and then I tripped over a fallen branch and hurt my foot, it hurt so much I couldn't move it so I sat down for a rest, then I accidentally fell asleep, and when I woke up, my foot and stomach had both gotten better, and so now I'm heading to the church."

What happened ...?
Something did happen, huh...
At least come up with a better lie.
Ahaha...
Kaiii!
Sonya
Ahaha, thank goodness, thank goodness.

It's fine, it's fine. If you're okay, then it's fine.
Sorry I'm late!
So...

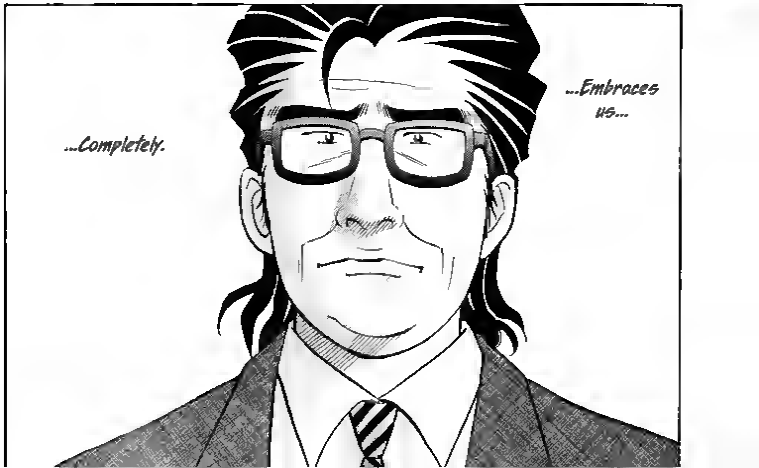
Right! Let's do that.
Let's do it after the memorial service is over.
It's already started so maybe it'll be a bit hard to look for him in this crowd.
Ah...

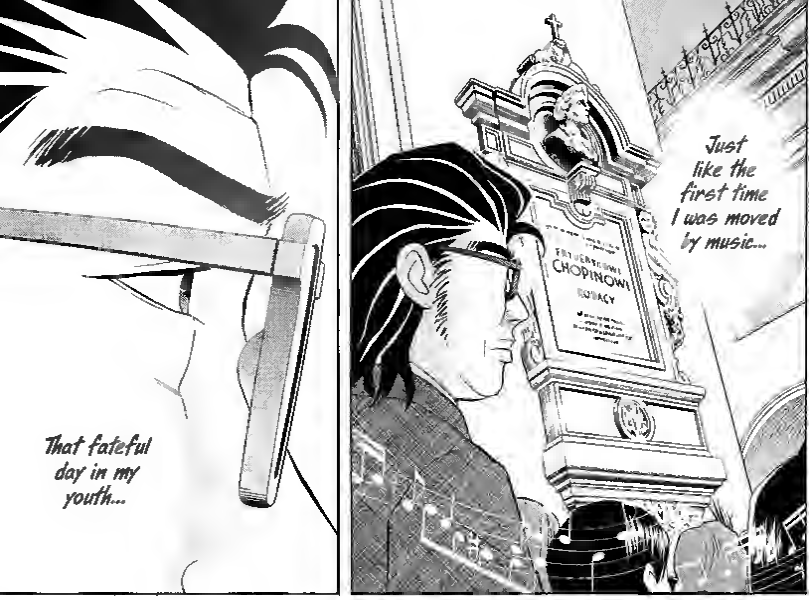
October 17, the anniversary of Chopin's death...

The contestants, the judges, as well as the audience...
The competition adjourned.

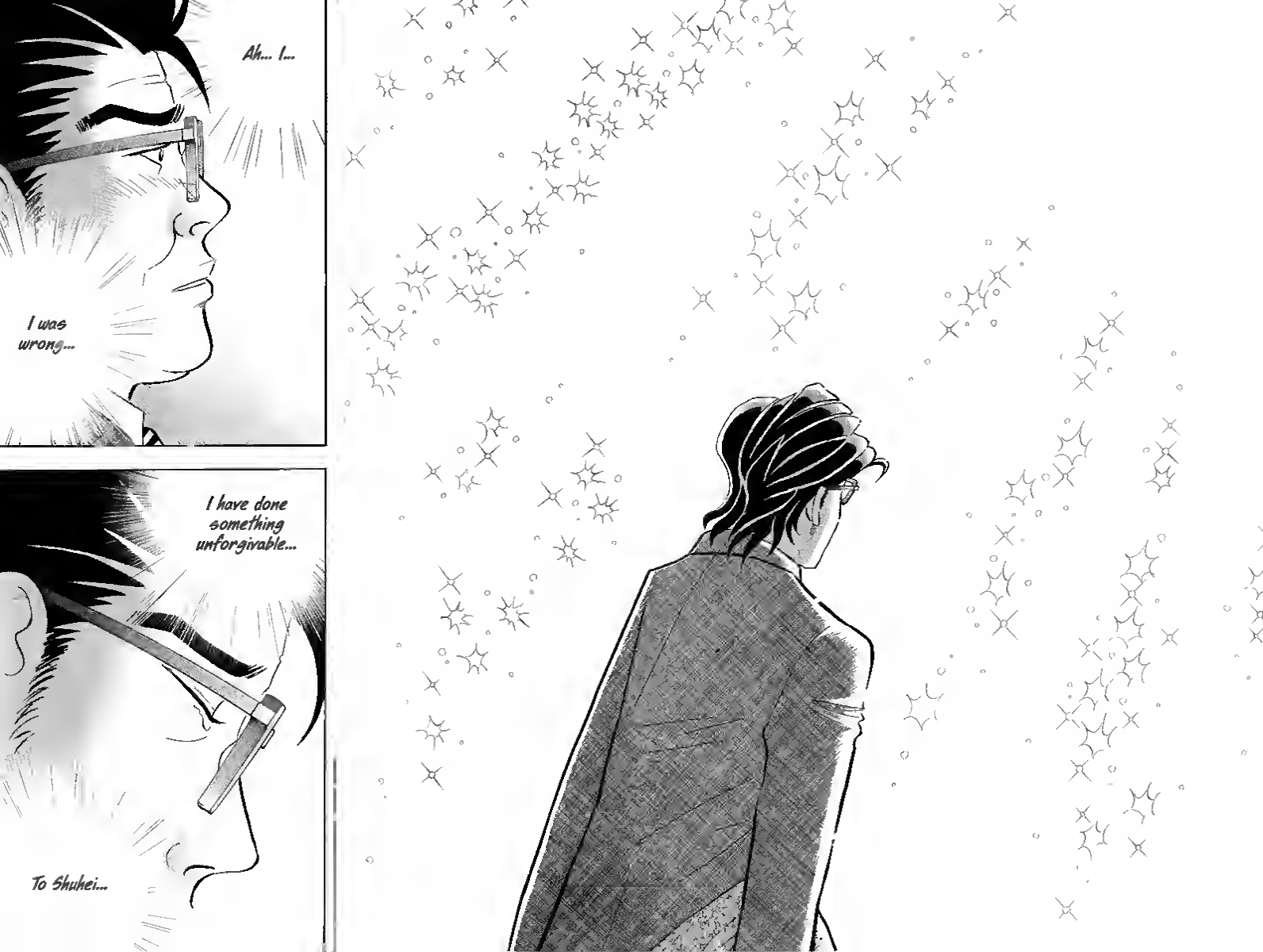
Take a break from the competition, just for this day, to offer their prayers to Chopin.
GDZIE SKARB TWÓJ, TAM I SERCE TWOJE
FRYDERYKOWI CHOPINOWI
RODACY
Where Chopin's heart is enshrined ...
Mozart's Requiem fills this Holy Cross Church...

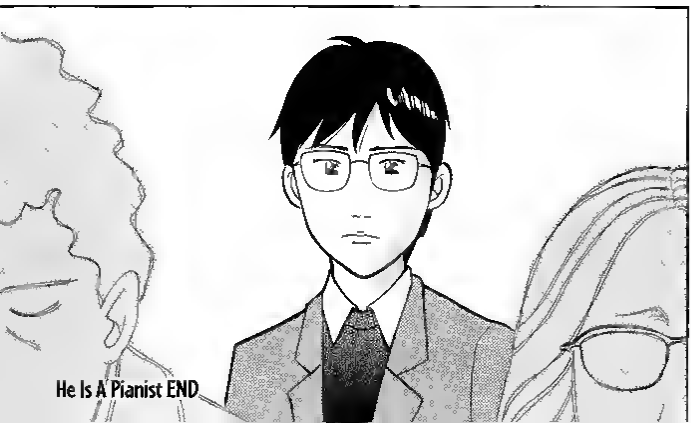
Mozart's
Requiem...


...Embraces
us...
...Completely.


That fateful day in my youth...
Just like the first time I was moved by music...
CHOPINOWI

My whole being is completely enveloped by music.


Ah... I...
I was wrong...
I have done something unforgivable...
To Shuhei...



He Is A Pianist END

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Chapter 181

The Liberating Requiem

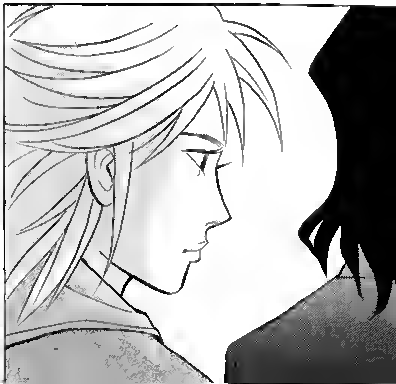
...Was actually performed at Chopin's funeral service.
Mozart's Requiem...
This music...
...Can't be played for just anyone who died.

It's only performed to mourn a few chosen ones.
That's what Mr. Pavlas once told me...
Being immersed in it...

All the filth and darkness within will be cleansed...

All this anger... hatred... jealousy...

Seem to be dissolving.



...My self-loathing is...
Even...

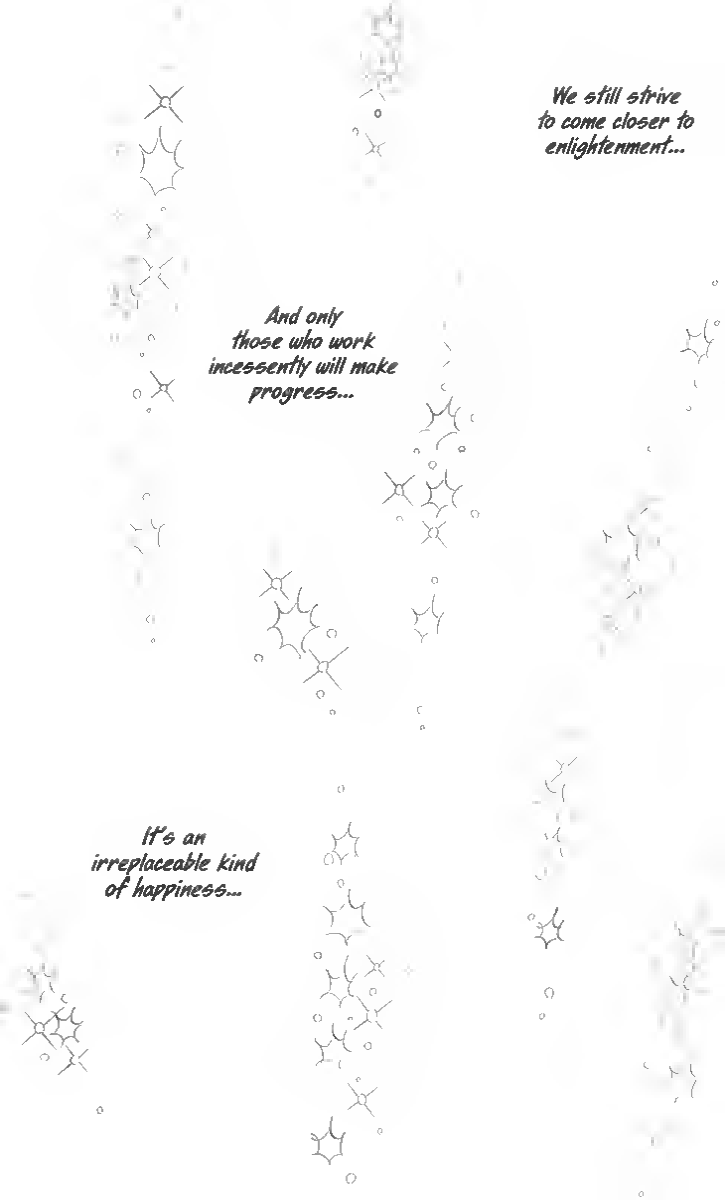
I've made the biggest mistake of my life...
I was wrong.
Realize such an important thing...
How could I...

For the first time...
...Only when Shuhei has gone missing...
I...
Shuhei-kun...
He isn't here...
Maybe he's at the other exit?
If he goes that way, then Youichirou will see him.

For us musicians...
The pursuit of music is the joy of our lives...

But of course, given how short life is,
Even if we dedicate an entire lifetime of effort to music...

...To fully understand everything about it.
It still isn't possible...
But even so...

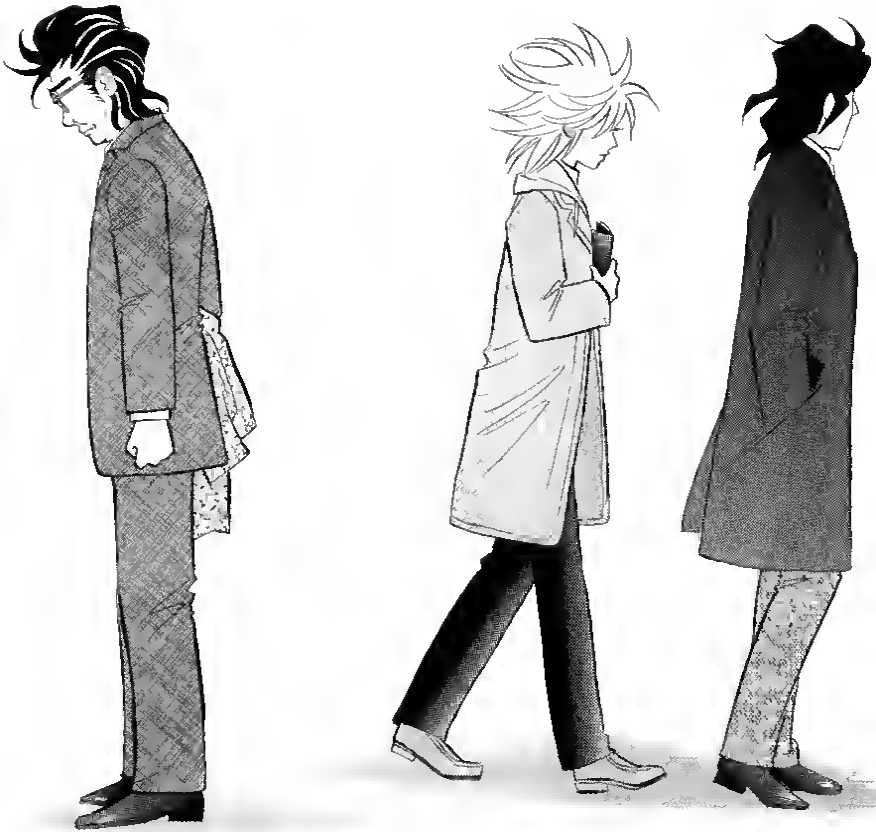

We still strive to come closer to enlightenment...
And only those who work incessently will make progress...
It's an irreplaceable kind of happiness...

To look up to someone...
To compete with them...

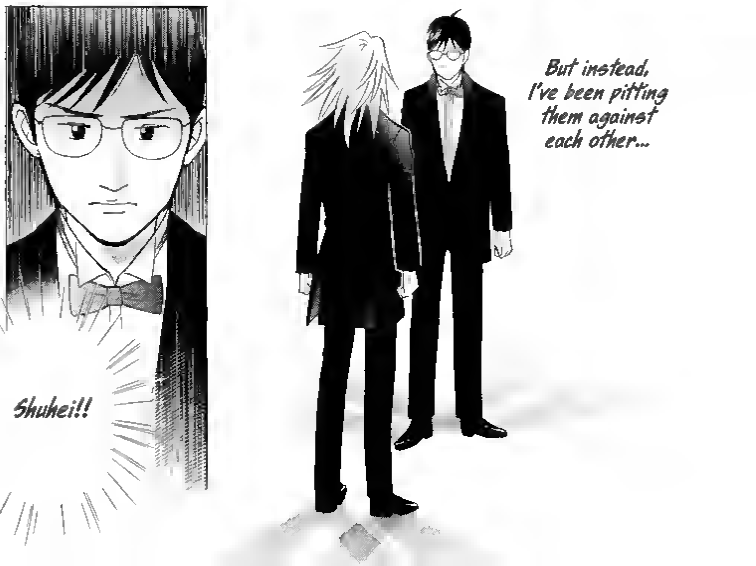
I don't think being eager to win is necessarily a bad thing.
How could I have forgotten...
But that aside...

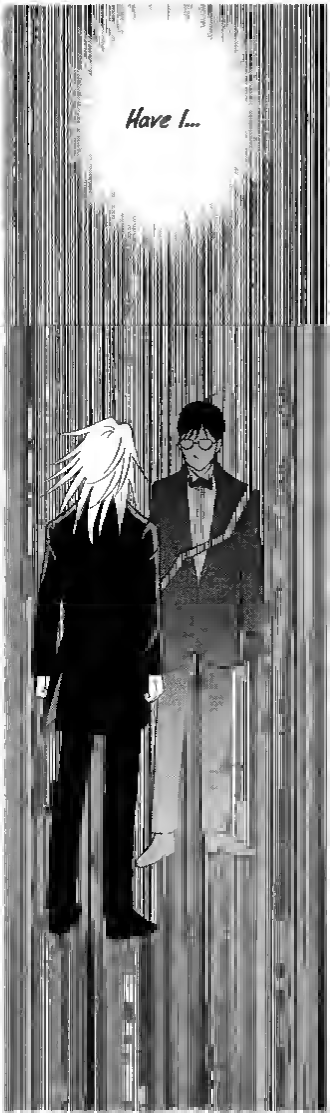
...Something as essential...

...As the happiness that comes with playing music.



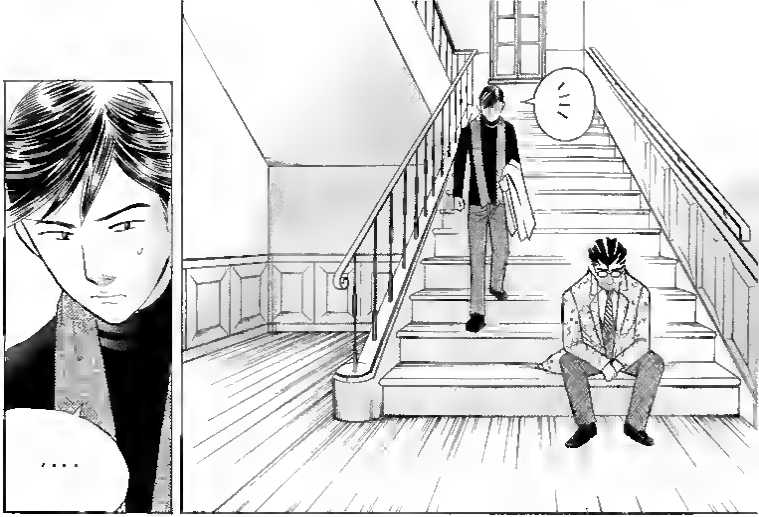
Ichinose should've been his companion in their pursuit of a common goal...
I...


But instead, I've been pitting them against each other...
Shuhei!!



Caused Shuhei nothing but pain...?!!

Shuhei!!


....

Amamiya's father?
Why would he be here so early in the morning?
Ah... Mr. Pang!

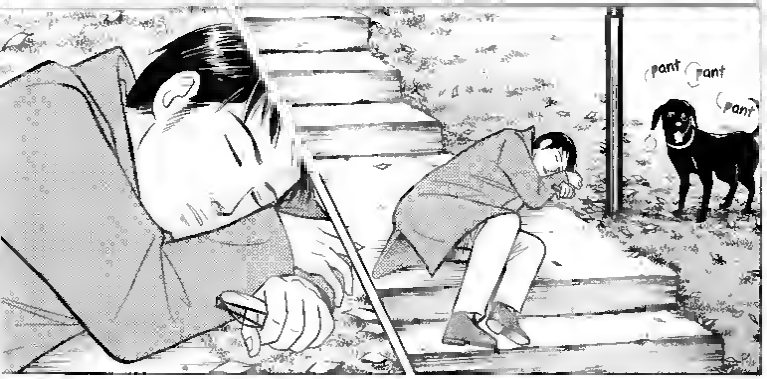
Could you please call me at this number?
E-Excuse... me... If you happen to see Shuhei...
?
No...
It's kind of embarrassing, but I haven't been able to contact him ever since yesterday.
Is he not in his room?
I speak Japanese...
Got it.
I'll contact you if I see him...

Ah... Pang-kun!
Yes...
Your playing was wonderful, in both the first and second round.
It's your turn today isn't it, on the first day of the finals.
Good luck and give it your best today as well!
Thank you very much.

crinkle
.....
Dammit... My morning walk is ruined...
My mornings are important and not meant to be disturbed...
What the hell is that Amamiya brat up to...

Good morning!
Sorry! I'm a bit late today.
What's the matter? You're making quite a fuss...
Eh?

WOOF
WOOF
What the...


pant
pant
pant

Are you freaking kidding me...
Lying on the path along my stroll...

Hey, get up!

Get up!
Stop fooling around!

Get up if you're not dead!!
The Liberating Requiem END

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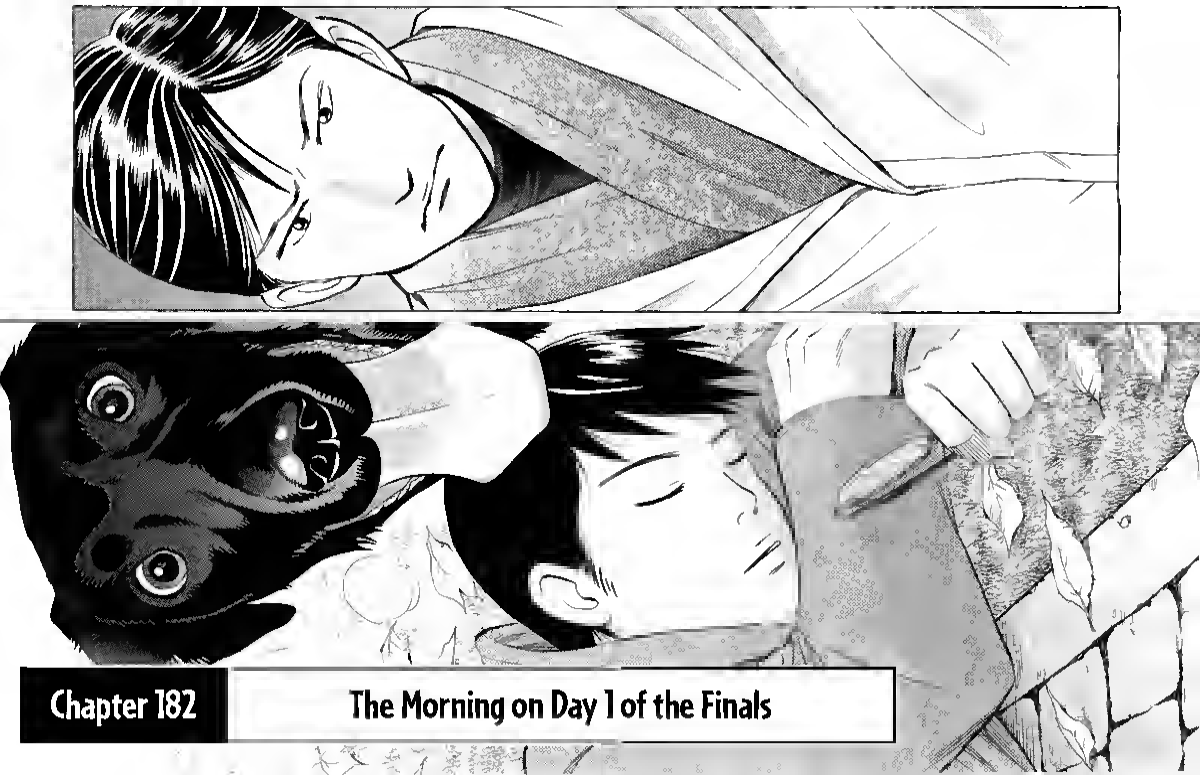
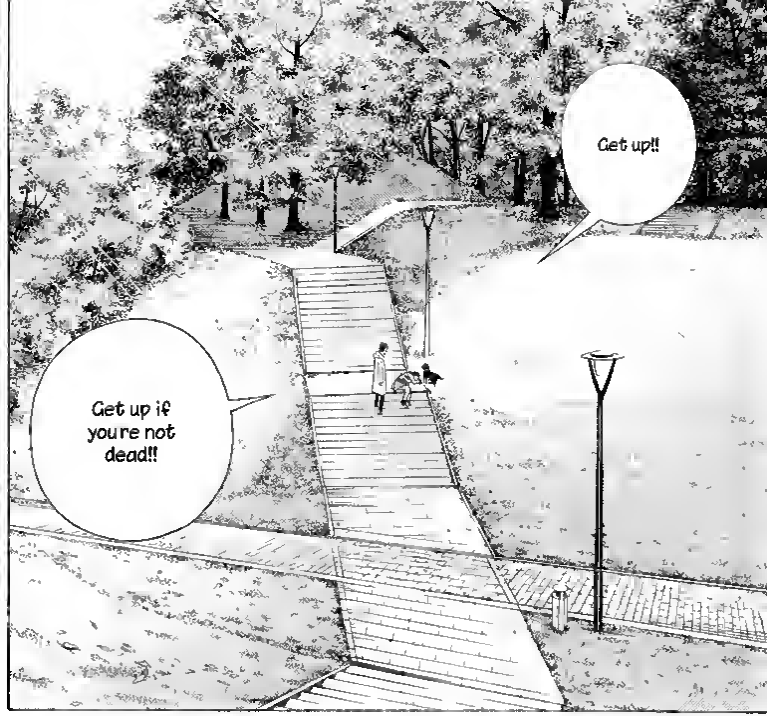


Chapter 182

The Morning on Day 1 of the Finals

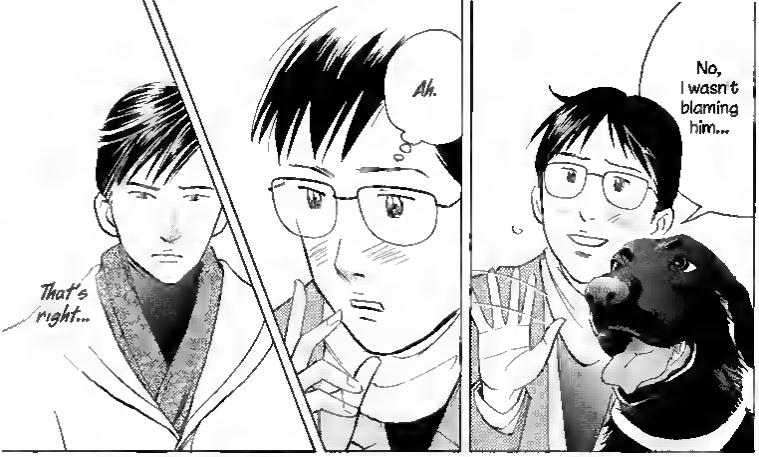

Get up!!
Get up if you're not dead!!

Uh...
It's cold...
And smelly...

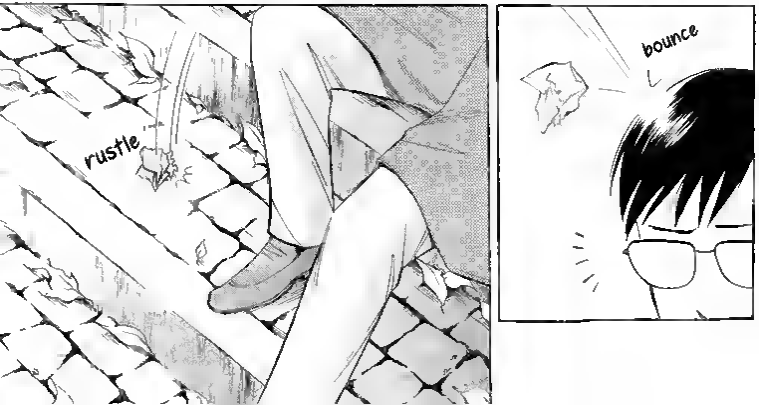
Uhh...
lick

Get UP!!
Whoaa...
Wei...
Pang?
Ah.. No...
I didn t actually mean to sleep here...
If you want to freeze to death, do it somewhere else!
Why would you sleep here at this time of the year...
You must be kidding me, Amamiya...

So while I was sitting here spacing out, this dog came...
Right, boy?
He snuggled up with me and it was so warm and fluffy I just...
And I was hesitating if I should go back to my apartment or just wait for the school to open for the day...
The school entrance was locked so I couldn't get in...
What the, so it was the dogs fault, huh...
Kids like you always try to put the blame on others.
Has it ever crossed your mind that if it hadn't been for him, you'd have frozen to death by now?


That's right...
Ah.
No, I wasn't blaming him...

I was also thinking about something like that...
Last night, when I was wandering through the streets...


rustle
bounce

Father...
Hurry up and call him.
crinkle
Your dad has made himself home in front of the apartment, you know..
Just accept the result and move on...
Seri-ously...
Did you enjoy making your parents worry that much?
To suddenly disappear like that...

That I hate the most.
It's spoiled weaklings like you...
That...
That hurts...
From now on, stay out of my sight!
It's hard to swallow. Even if it came from Wei Pang.
His rejection was so direct it felt as if my heart was stabbed... It hurts...

And yet, I've dealt an even more hurtful blow to Kai...
How terrible of me!

Pang-san...
I... have come to terms with my results!
Because I have played the best I could...
From now on, it's a brand new beginning for me.
Pang-san... Today is the first day of the finals, right?
Sorry for causing you trouble.
Well, go back if you're happy.
To Japan or wherever.
I have no time for spoiled brats like you.

Pang-san...
How is it that you're always so filled with confidence?
Eh?
Filled with confidence?
Pang-san.
What!
Didn't I say I have no time for you?

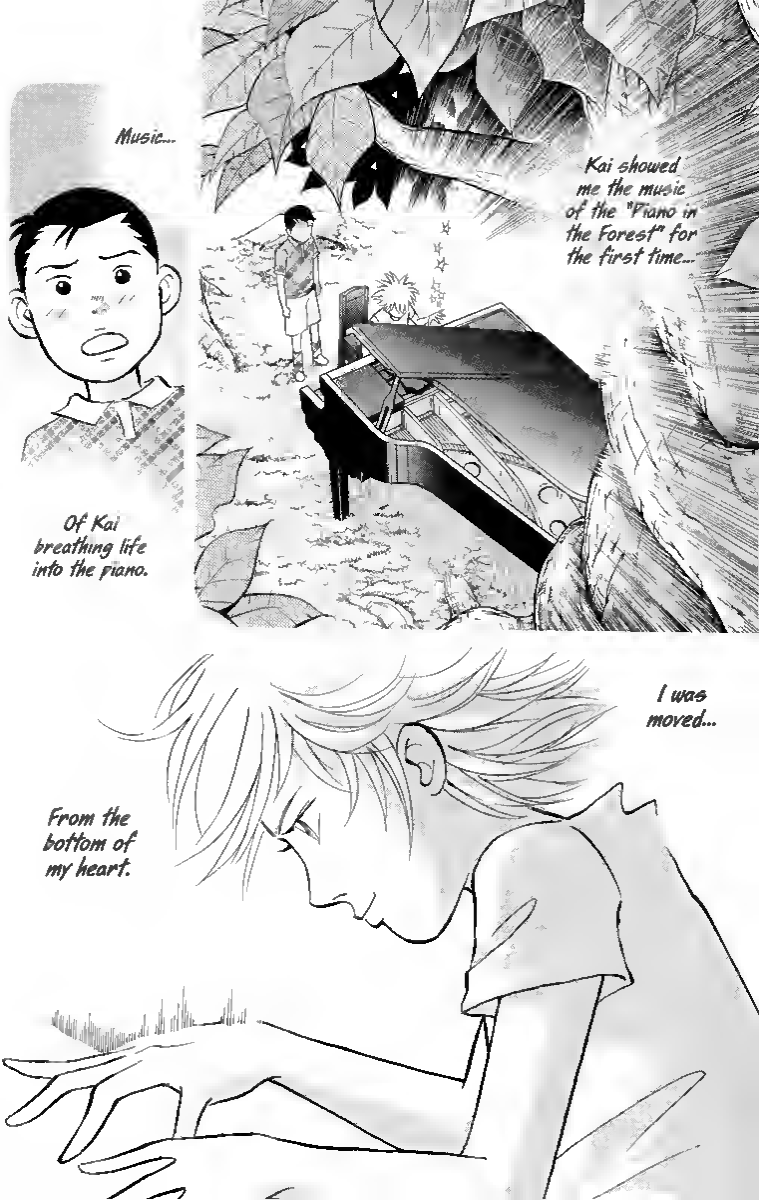
...Standing on the edge of a cliff.
It just so happens that I'm always...
Eh?

Dammit.
I said too much.
That's right, I'm always...
Always... living with the feeling that I'm on the edge of a sheer cliff. There's no respite from this feeling.
However, when I'm playing the piano...
I'm temporarily liberated from it.

Since it's especially cold today...
If it hadn't been for you, I really would have frozen to death.
Thank you...
pant
pant
We were in the middle of a story, right! I fell asleep though...
Ah...
Are you having some free time on your own?
You don't seem like a stray dog...
Where are you from?
Pant
Where was I?
Maybe at where I transferred schools?
I...

I...
Hmm...
So that's his owner huh...
I met Kai in fifth grade, when I transferred schools...

I was already bullied by the other kids...
As soon as I moved in...
But thanks to Kai, I was saved, and we became fast friends.
And then...


Music...
Kai showed me the music of the "Piano in the Forest" for the first time...
Of Kai breathing life into the piano.
I was moved...
From the bottom of my heart.

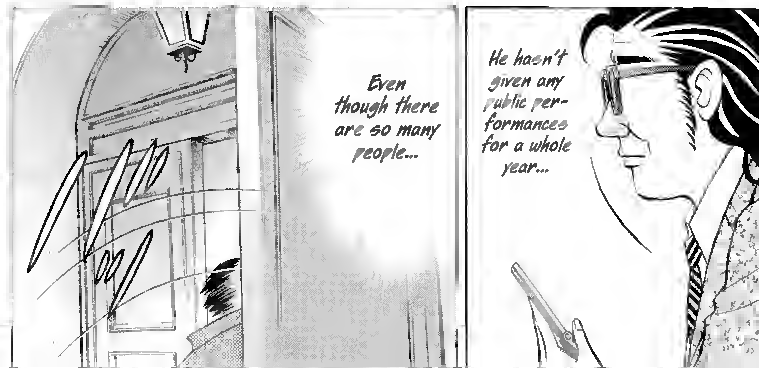
Because back then, I hated my piano lessons so much I was always dreading them...
I would have probably quit the piano...
Had I not been moved by that...
...Cursed my encoutner with Kai.
Deep down, I've always...
I would have long since given up on the piano that's so precious to me...
But the truth is, if I hadn't met him...

I had regretted bringing Kai and Ajino-sensei together...
But I was wrong.
Without Ajino-sensei, Kai would have never set foot on the stage.
And if Kai had never set foot on the stage, I wouldn't have chased after him and come all the way here.
I would have never been motivated to rise to this level.

And discovered my own "voice"!
After I came here, I had my first taste of what it's like to become one with the piano...
Woof Woof Woof
But that's only because we had different starting points.
I may still be a long way behind Kai, who has always been able to play like that...
This is the conclusion I've reached after strolling in the streets through-out the night!

Father...

I dragged him into my mistake.
I'm so sorry, Father.

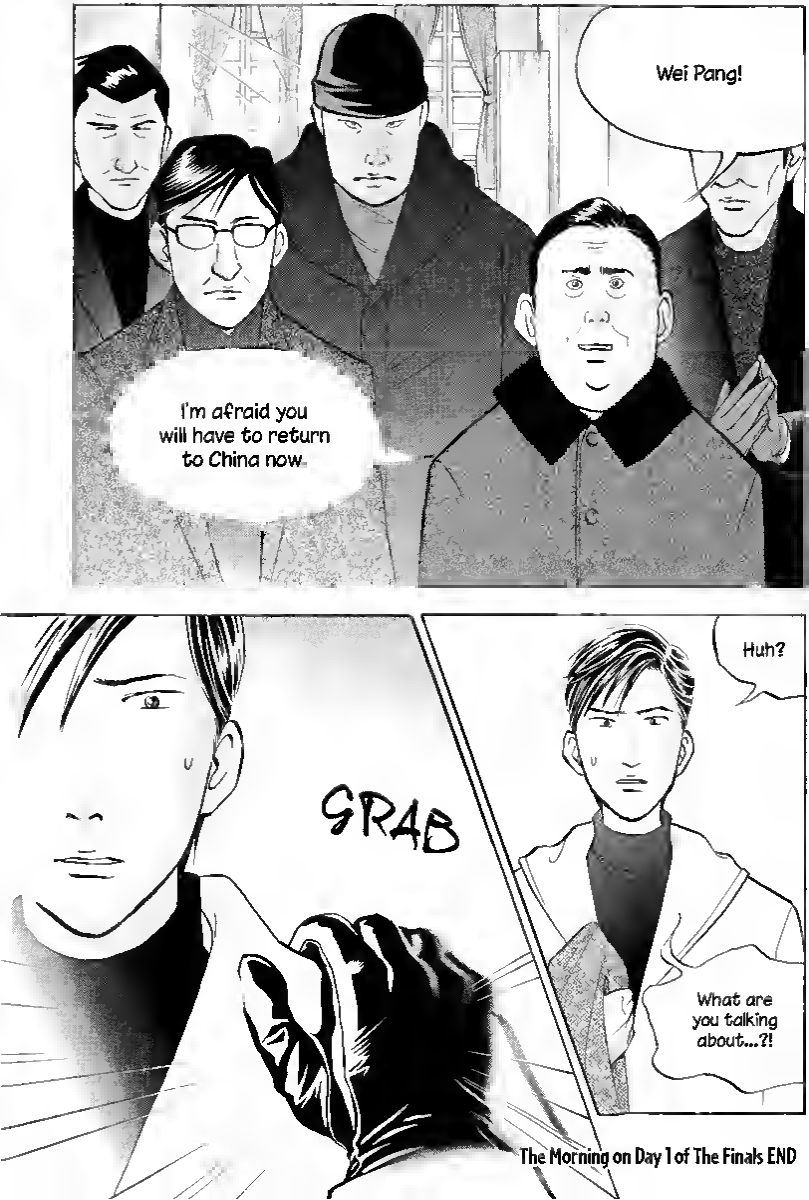

Even though there are so many people...
He hasn't given any public performances for a whole year...

F... Father...
Sorry for making you worry!
Shuhei ...
...Longing to hear him play.
There are...
...Many things that I need to tell you.
It doesn't matter... As long as you're all right...

Haha... Well, we have plenty of time on our hands, don't we?
I also have many things to say to you.
Haha.. we've got all the time in the world after all!

....
Amamiya's dad has finally left...
Man... Thank goodness...
Better prepare the best I can.
My performance is at 7pm...

What...
Who the hell are you?!!



The Morning on Day 1 of The Finals END

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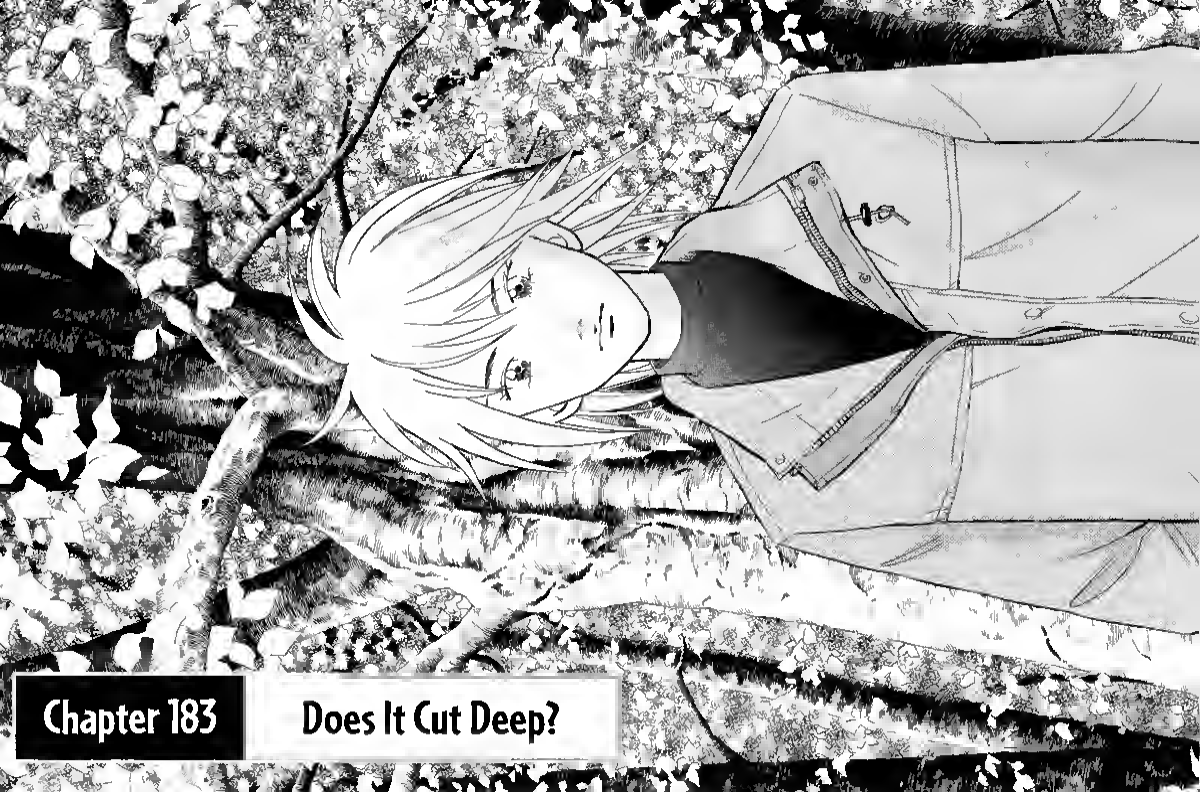
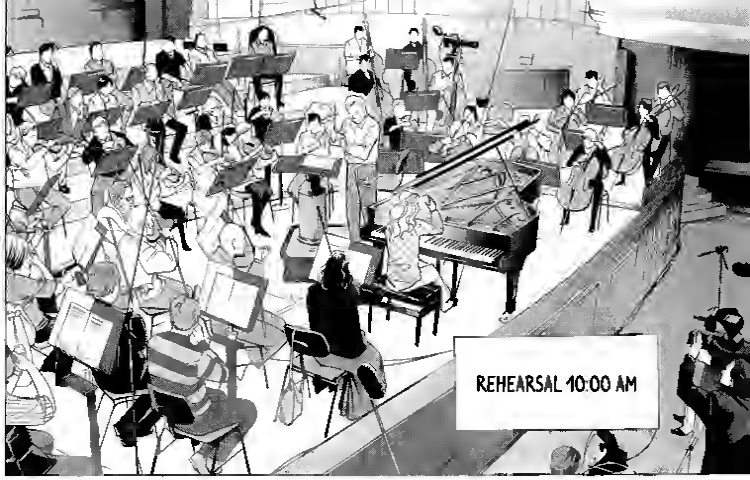


Chapter 183 Does It Cut Deep?

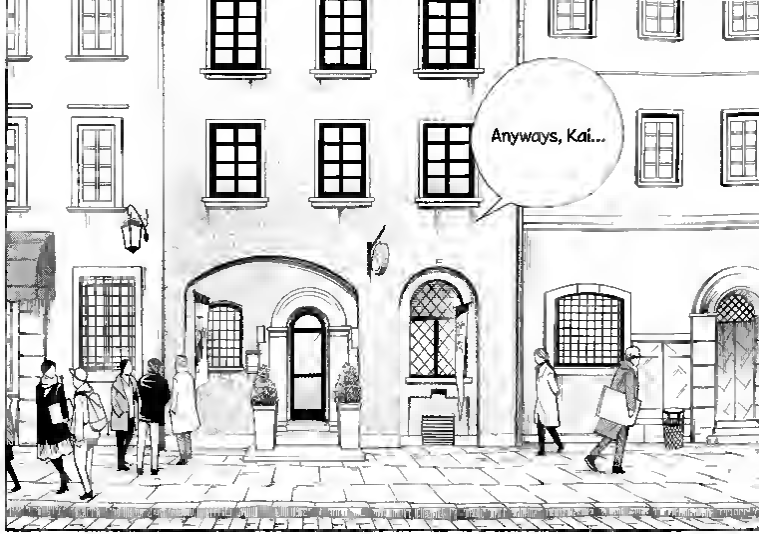

REHEARSAL 10:00 AM

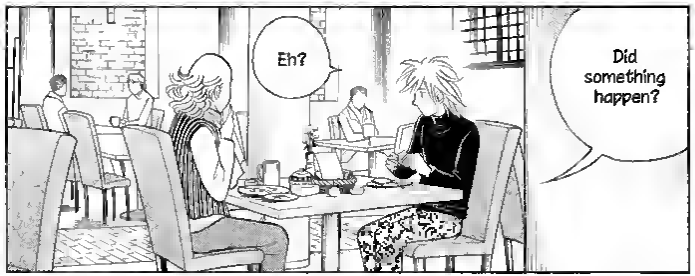
FINALS DAY 1
CONTESTANT NO 1
NO.45 SOPHIE ORMESSON
(FRANCE)

PRESSROOM
Hey, Wei Pang still isn't here...
Has anyone seen him at all?!
Eh... Nope, haven't seen him.
It's already time for his rehearsal.
This is bad, what should we do?
DAY 1
CONTESTANT NO 3
NO 62 AUBREY THEISS
(GERMANY)
CONTESTANT WAITING ROOM
Theiss has already arrived for a long time though...

NASTROJ 11:00 AM
Kaaii~
Ah, you're here, as I thought!
You weren't at your apartment, or picking up your phone...
So I figured that you'd be here!

Morning.
Ah... Grandpa Jean.
Good morning.
How's your condition?
I guess you were playing the piano til morning, huh?
Uh... So-so...
I wasn't paying attention to my cell at all.
Ah, sorry...
Kai, let's go get some breakfast!


Anyways, Kai...


Eh?
Did something happen?

I thought something might have happened 'cause you have been acting weird since the day they announced the finalists... You weren't yourself last night at Chopin's memorial service either...
If nothing did, then it's fine!
Some-thing...?

Kai!
You're gonna play in the finals.
You know that, right?
Sousuke told me to leave you alone...
But I couldn't.
The real battle starts 3 days from now!
Aren't you aiming for the top?
So if anything's bothering you...
Don't you want to realize your dream?

Yesterday...
...said
..hated
me.

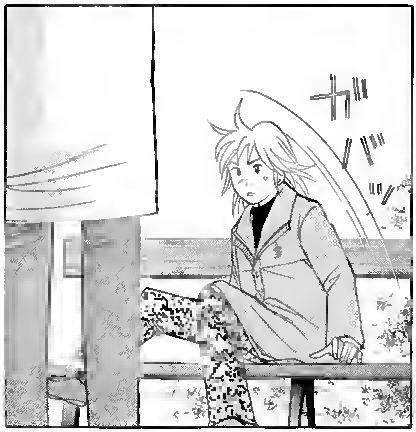
...has
hated me
since a long
time ago...
What?

Eh?!
That's what... said...
Couldn't Sae-chan have at least waited until the competition is over?!
Of all things to happen right before the finals...
What... What the heck?!
But I might have had a slight hunch...
Think Think
I haven't really thought about it...
You know... Aren't there usually some... signs for this kind of thing?
Hahaha
So... you didn't realize? That you were being hated?

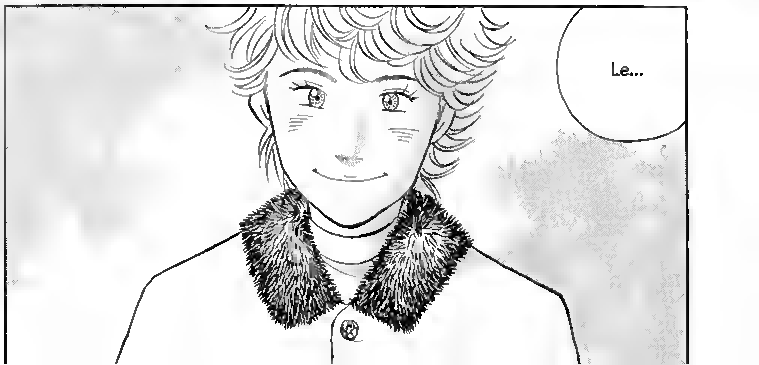
It was quite a heavy blow.
But there's no helping this kind of thing... So all I could do is accept it...
Sigh...
That's just...
But I'm okay now.
I've already gotten over it, so don't worry!
But that person might just be saying things like that to get your attention!
My attention?
You know, don't girls say they hate you when they actually like you?
I hear it's a girl thing...
A girl thing?
Ah, he thinks I'm talking about Sae-chan.
Girls often nagged at me too when I was young...

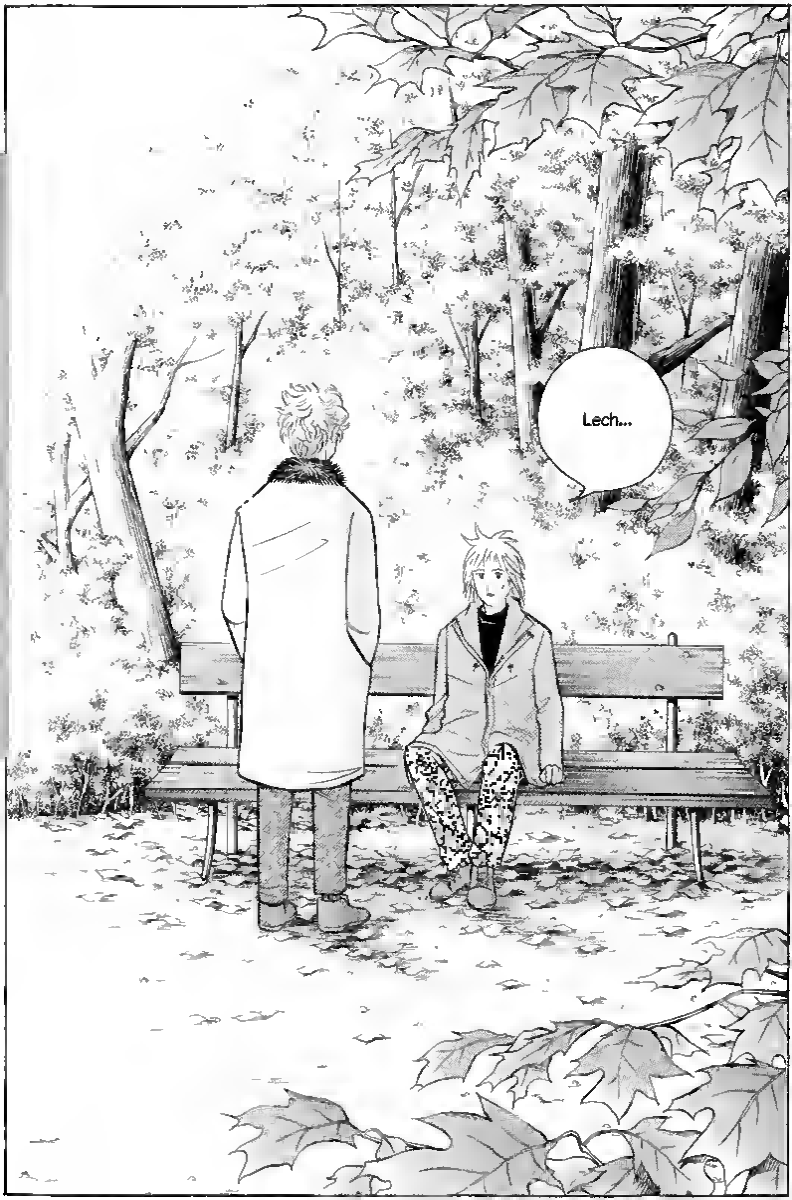
"I'm okay!"
As if I would be.
The pain hasn't eased a bit...
For Amamiya... who just had to spit everything out...
But...

The pain must've been even more unbearable.



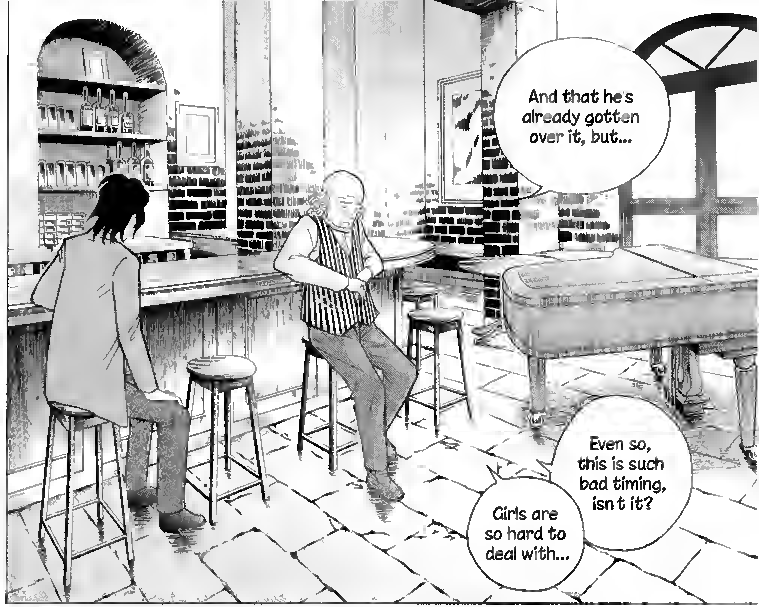
Does it cut deep?


Le...


Lech...

So... Does it cut deep?
What do you mean?
What...
...are you talking about?

Eh?
Sae-chan dumped him?
That was yesterday?
Yeah... He said he was already fine...
She was like, "I hate you!"
And that's not all. She even said, "I've always hated you."


And that he's already gotten over it, but...
Even so, this is such bad timing, isn't it?
Girls are so hard to deal with...

But ever since two days ago...

Sousuke! What time is it in Japan?
I wonder if we should call her...

He hasn't been himself.
And that night as well...
Jean.
?
Did Kai explicitly say that it was Sae-chan?
Hmm?

I saw you and Amamiya talking in the forest yesterday.
You guys were talking in Japanese, so I had no idea what you were saying...

Eh?
Could it have been my fault?
Did I cause the fight between you two?
Are you all right?
But I saw you cry, Kai.
You've been crying ever since Amamiya left...
Because of my lie...
...from that time?
You've got to congratulate him too!
That's great!

It has nothing to do with you.
It probably has nothing to do with Lech...
Because it is my existence itself that Amamiya can't stand...
Kai, I'm sorry!
I lie a lot... I did tell you that, right?!
I just couldn't resist pulling a prank on you since you always seem so clueless...
Eh? Are you mad?

But if... Kai's playing becomes all messed up because of me...
Could you please leave me alone?
Eh...?! But...
step
step
turn
SHOCK
Then...
You'll be punished by Heaven?
Eeek

I'll turn negativity into positivity!
I definitely will!
Don't worry. It won't get messed up!
So you won't be punished either!
Lech! See you at the finals!

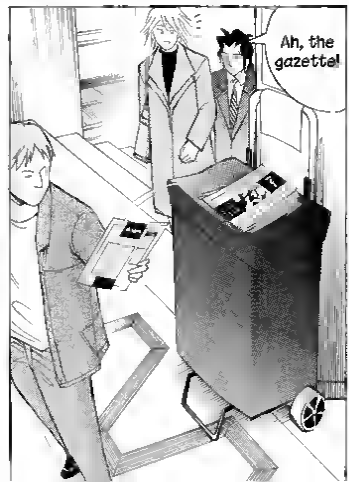
Turn negativity into positivity, huh..?
Isn't he full of himself!
Even though he was crying so hard...
While curled up in a ball...

I'll make positivity out of this negativity!

. . .

I swear!

Is he feeling agitated?
There aren't any big changes in his playing... But he seems to be putting more force into it...
Kai!
It's still a bit early, but do you feel like watching the finals today?
Wei Pang, huh?

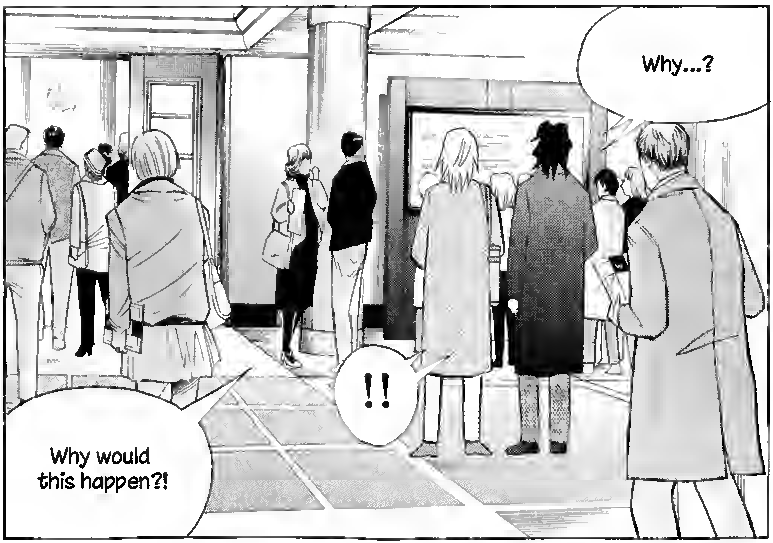

Ah, the gazette!

Gazeta

Who's this?
It's m-e.
Whoa.
Huh, what?
What a face.
No waaaay! You must be joking!
His name isn't on today's programme!!
Wei Pang won't be playing today?!
Eh?

The performance Schedule for Today

6:00	No. 45	Sophie ORMESSON (FRANCJA/FRANCE)
7:00	No. 62	Aubrey THEISS (NIEMCY/GERMANY)



Does It Cut Deep? END

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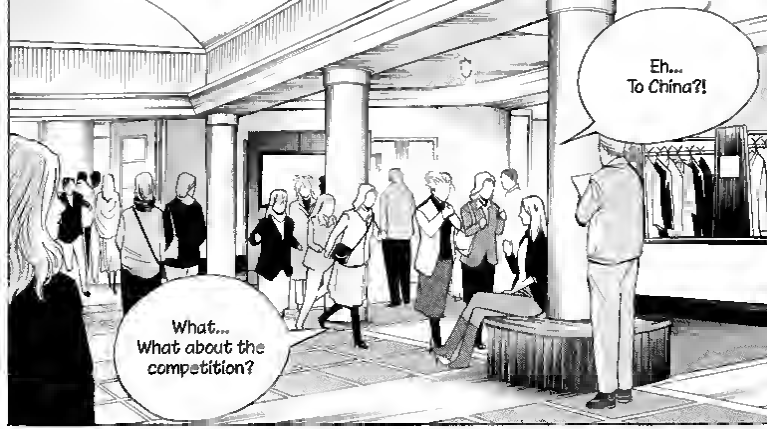
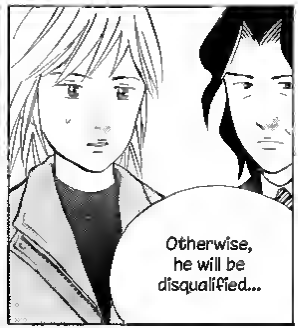
Chapter 184 Where Has Wei Pang Disappeared To?

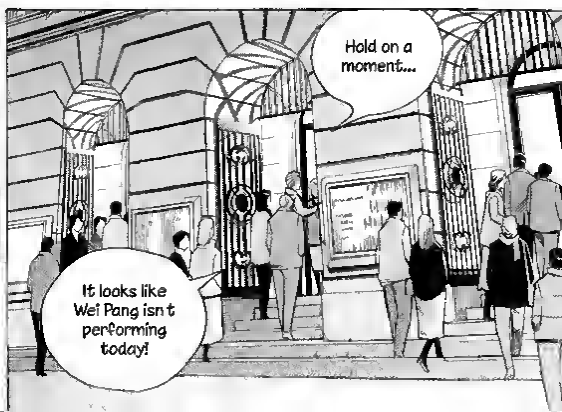
I can't watch Wei Pang play...?!
No way...!
I've got it, I've got it!
I know what's going on!!
Wei Pang's dad is on the verge of death...
So he's already flown back to his country!!


Eh...
To China?!
What...
What about the
competition?


Otherwise,
he will be
disqualified...

If he can make
it back by the last
day of the finals,
He will still be
able to perform...

Eh? You
kidding?


Hold on a
moment...
It looks like
Wei Pang isn't
performing
today!

I came here just for Wei Pang, you know!
Me too!
Ah, the gazette about the second round is out!

The Truth About
Wei Pang

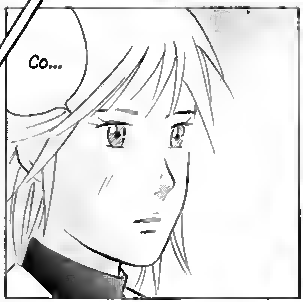
Wei Pang has abstained from the competition?!

That hasn't been confirmed.
If he can make it back by the final day, then it'll be fine.
There's only 3 days left though; will he make it?
Where is China, anyway?
Is a 2-way trip possible within 3 days?
Hehehe...

I'm so glad we interviewed the father before this.
Let's just hope that he'll breathe his last breath soon.
We're in luck!!
What perfect timing; it's as if somebody has been plotting this all along.
Then Pang will make it back just in time... and claim his championship in triumph!
Ah... If it really gets that dramatic, we could even make a book out of this scoop!
But still, Victoria...
Did you really mix in this article with the ones at the newsstand in the hall?

You'll be in trouble if you're busted!
That won't happen any time soon!
It's just a little experiment...
So only a few lucky fellows get to read this!
Gazeta
That Talk About Wei Pang
I even made it exactly like the real copy, you know!
People are in for a real shock!
No, that'd be Aubrey Theiss!
Everyone's going on and on about Wei Pang!
Isn't Sophie great enough for everybody?!

It's almost time, Tamakaši-sensei!
Ah, the orchestra's coming in!
How inspiring...
The Warsaw Philharmonic...


Co...

Ah, they're tuning!
I've spoken with the concert master, you know.
Oh, really?

You'll be performing with them soon!
Aha... I can't wait.

Cool...

Ah, here you are...
Ah, Grandpa Jean!
Not for sure!
They say if he can make it on the last day...
Did Wei Pang abstain?
They're making quite the fuss at the entrance.
It's such a shock knowing we don't get to watch him play, isn't it?
Yeah, it really is!
How unfortu-nate...

Oh yeah, there are two different kinds.
Ah, it's starting!
...is different from ours!
The gazette that you have...
Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!
Welcome to the final round of this year's Chopin Competition!

Let's start off by introducing the judges
At last...

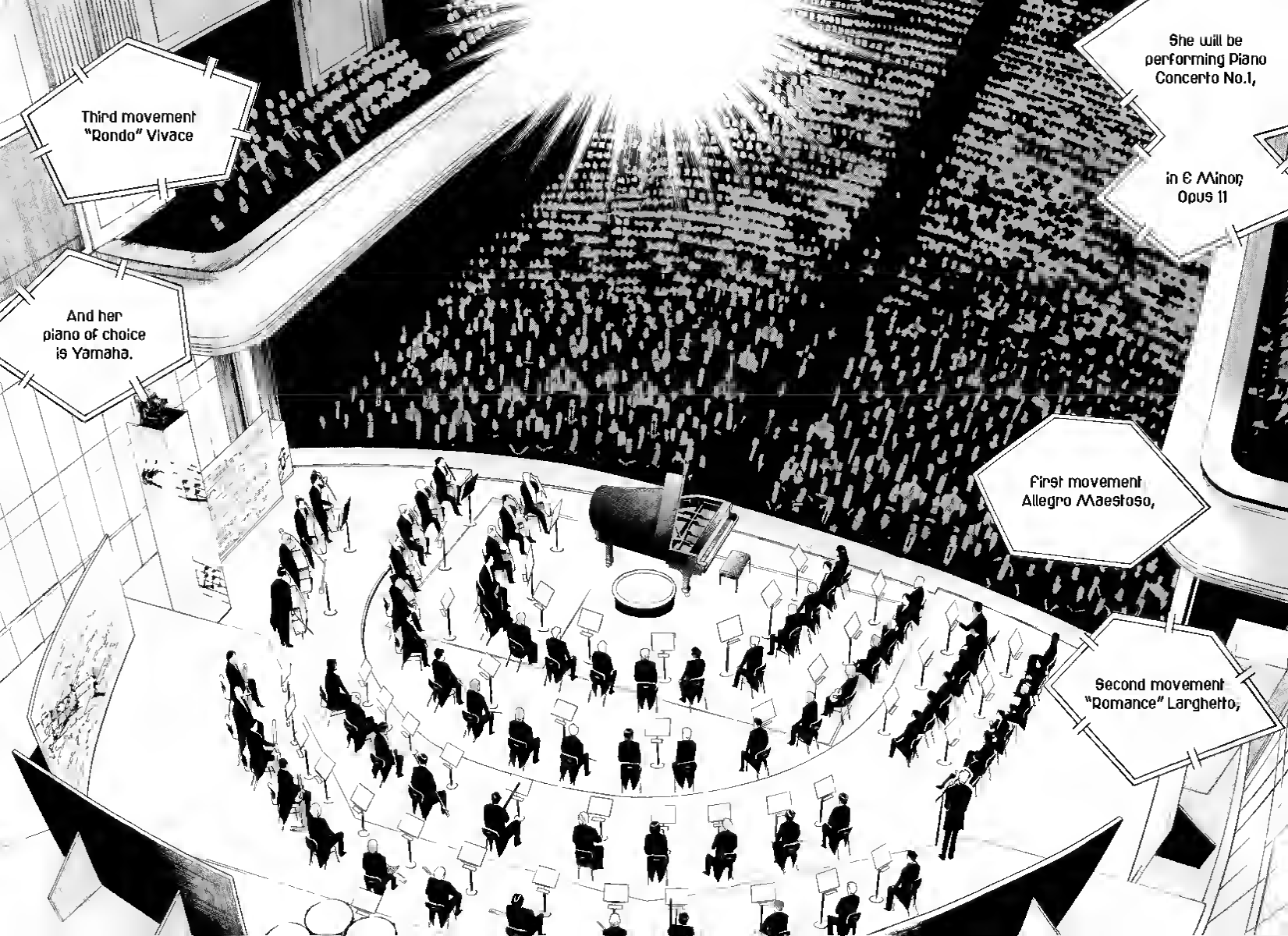
We should hurry!
The finals are about to...
Eh... Furthermore...
We are most honored to have them perform with our contestants...
Begin.

Please give them a huge round of applause!
The Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra, led by Antony Colt!

Our first contestant...
No. 45
Sophie Ormesson,
France!

Now,
let us begin!

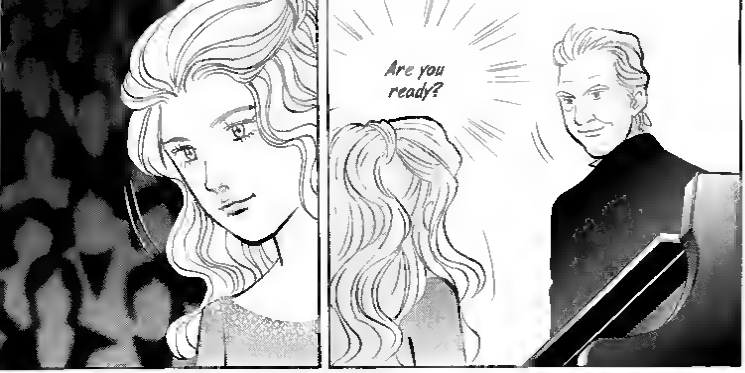
パパパパパ
チチチチチ


She will be performing Piano Concerto No.1,
in C Minor, Opus 11
First movement Allegro Maestoso,
Second movement "Romance" Larghetto,
Third movement "Rondo" Vivace
And her piano of choice is Yamaha.

No.45
Sophie Ormesson,
France!
Maestro:
Antony Colt.

Well then, what kind of concerto will Ormesson bring us?

Sophie...


Are you ready?

How about you guys?

Well, then...
Here we go!

It's gonna begin soon.
It's also time you made up your mind.
You've got no alternatives anyway, Wei Pang!
Just give in.
C'mon! Practise here to your heart's content until the last day of the final!
Where Has Wei Pang Disappeared To? END

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Chapter 185

Hao's Conspiracy

We won't be rough if you come quietly.
THE MORNING ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE FINALS
You're about to play in the finals, after all. No harm must come to that important body of yours.
Who the heck is this guy?!
Who...

Who the heck are these people?!
The morning on the first day of the finals, I was abducted by these people who came out of nowhere.
....
Actually, your foster father...
Hao Pang is in a critical state.
!
He wants to see you one last time before he goes.

Im...
Impossible.
We will accompany you on your way back to China.
Hao Pang just isn't the sort to do that...
Even if he really is on his deathbed!
ring...
ring...
ring...
Be my guest.
Let me confirm this!

Answer the phone.
ring
ring
Pick it up!
What on earth are they up to?
Can't get through?
TU-TU-
Don't worry. They'll send word soon enough.
So just hurry to the airport for now and return to Hao's side as quickly as possible.
I refuse.

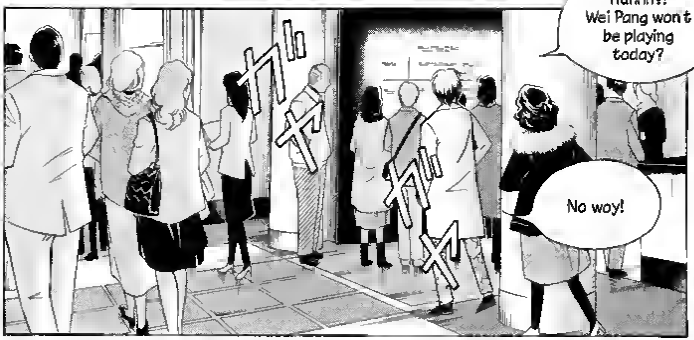
I will not return to China.
I am already thoroughly prepared for the performance today.
Please drive me back to my apartment.
Ah... But the thing is...
You are no longer scheduled to perform today.
What...
Having taken your situation into consideration,
They've agreed to move your performance to the last day.

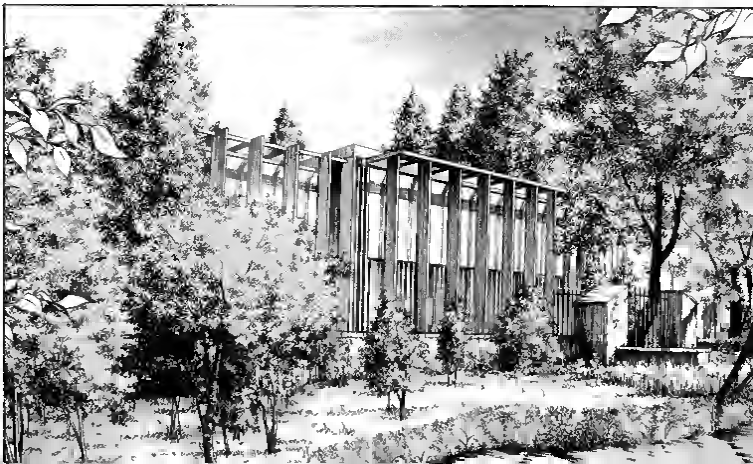
What is the meaning of this?!
It's a fait accompli!

Even if you haven't actually returned to China, you still have to keep up the act...
So you can't go back to your apartment.

The performance Schedule for Today

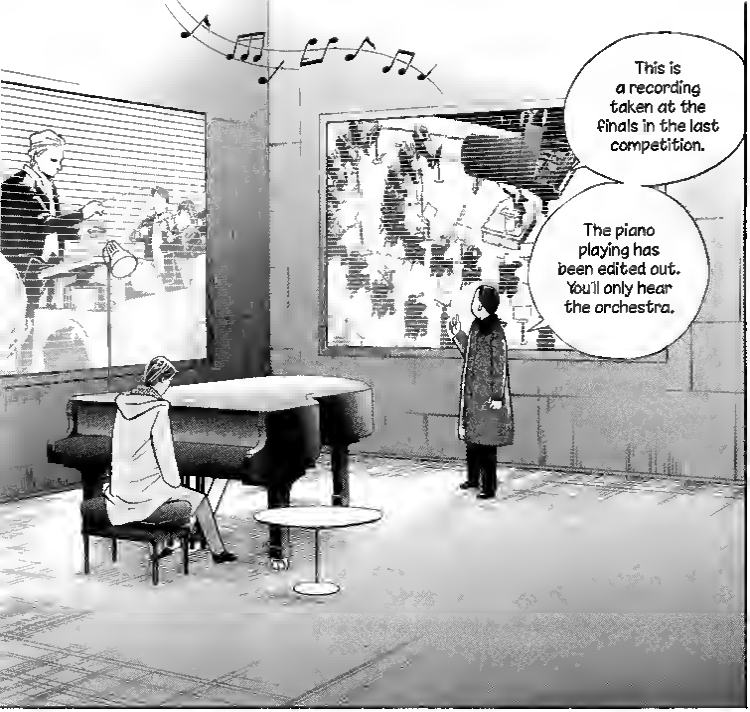
6:00	No. 45	Sophie ORMESSON (FRANCJA/FRANCE)
7:00	No 62	Aubrey THEISS (NIEMCY/GERMANY)

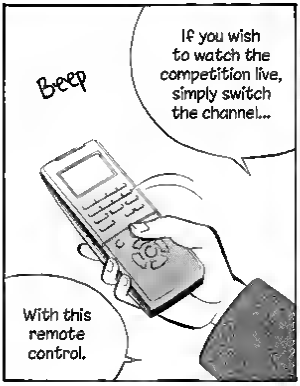




It's gonna begin soon.
It's also time you made up your mind.
You've got no alternatives anyway, Wei Pang!
Just give in.
C'mon! Practise here to your heart's content until the last day of the finals!
That's it... This guy here...

He was always there at the parties held by the Chinese Embassy.
I knew I've seen him somewhere before...
Is there a problem?
You get 3 more days for extra practice, you know...


This is a recording taken at the finals in the last competition.
The piano playing has been edited out. You'll only hear the orchestra.

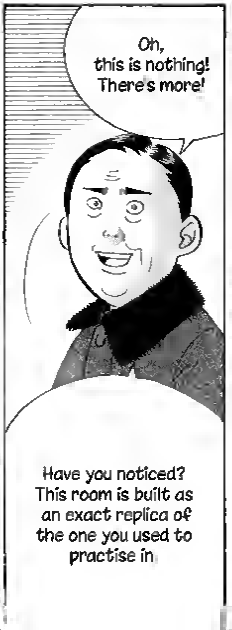

If you wish to watch the competition live, simply switch the channel...
Beep
With this remote control.

It's specially prepared for you to practise with.
....

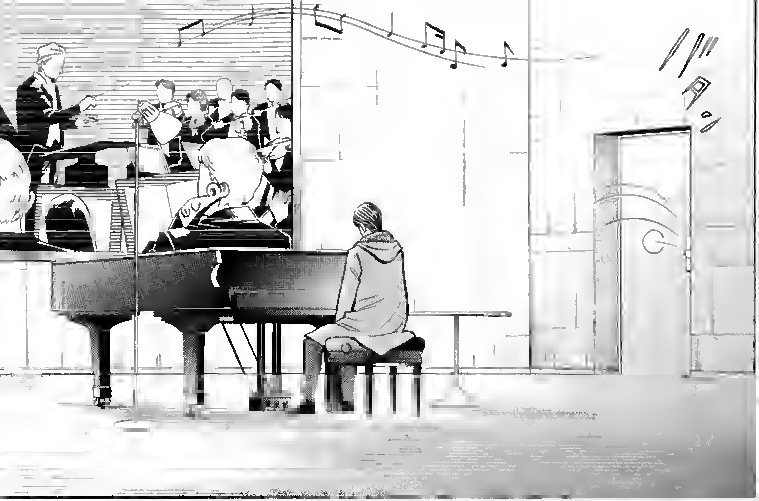
It has just started!
Oh!

I wish to be alone. Would you mind?

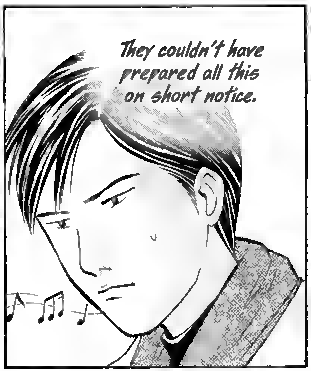
Of course not.

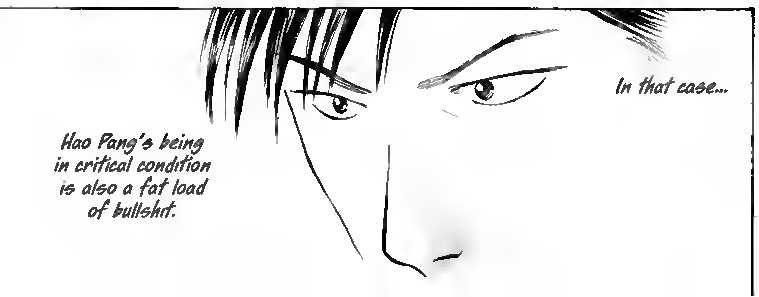

Oh, this is nothing! There's more!
Have you noticed? This room is built as an exact replica of the one you used to practise in

How thoughtful of you.

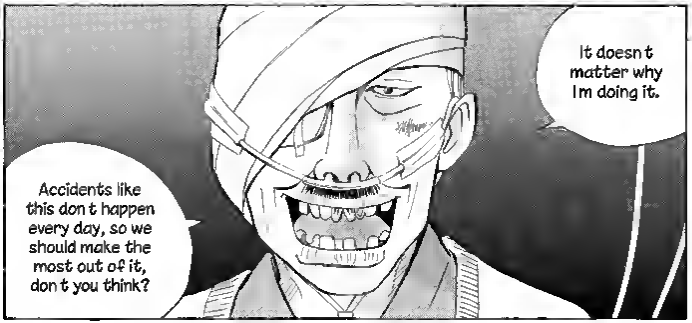


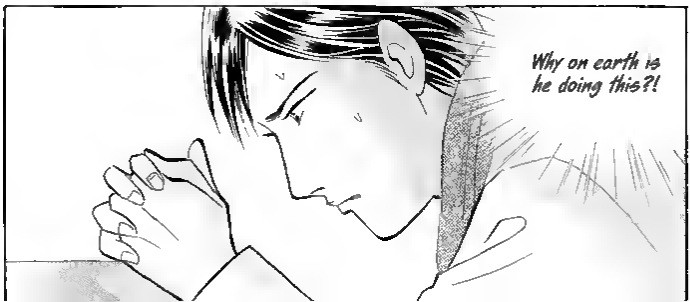
So the whole thing was planned from the start?


They couldn't have prepared all this on short notice.


In that case...
Hao Pang's being in critical condition is also a fat load of bullshit.

Ahaha...
Well, that was easy.


It doesn't matter why I'm doing it.
Accidents like this don't happen every day, so we should make the most out of it, don't you think?


Why on earth is he doing this?!

Don't tell me...
But I don't think this would benefit Wei.
The point is to have his performance moved from the first day to the last.
Nonsense.
I hear performances on the first and last days make very different impressions on the judges. The later he performs, the more advantageous it is to him.
He'd never feign illness even if I tell him to!
But that boy is stubborn as a mule.
Some contestants even feign illness to delay their performance.

Don't answer any of his calls until his performance is over!
Now listen.
He's kind to his father.
So I made use of that, just in case.
squeeze...
Dammit...
Don't tell me he's doing this for such a stupid reason...?

Nice intro.
Sophie... Ormesson.
The beginning sounds a bit rigid with just the orchestra playing...

But it's gotten much better once Sophie's piano joins in.

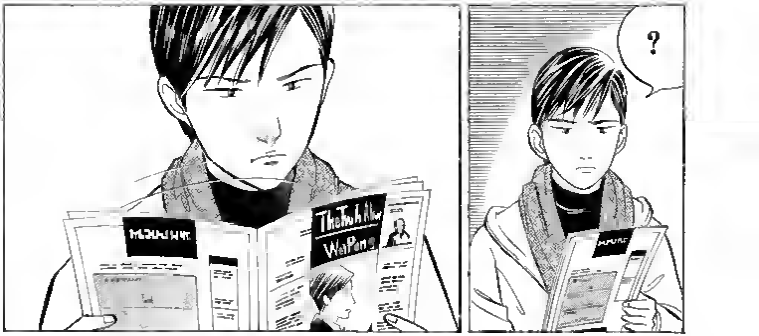
Her music is more spirited...
And supple than I thought...

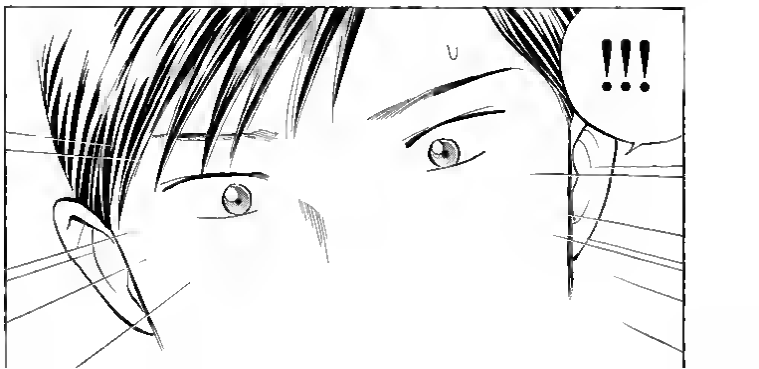
Her technique...
Has improved a great deal since the Long-Thibaud.

I...I'm sorry!
No problem.
So could you please let go of me already?
Damn. Even her smell is coming back.
But thanks to that...
I managed to get a whiff of fresh air in this suffocating room.

I've never...
Listened to her music properly before...
ガチャ
But this performance...
You haven't eaten anything since this morning, have you?
Your meal, sir.

This was mixed in with the gazettes distributed at the venue...
In case it makes its way to the wider public, I figure you should know about it first...
....
And here...


?


!!!

What...
What the??!!

Hao's Conspiracy END

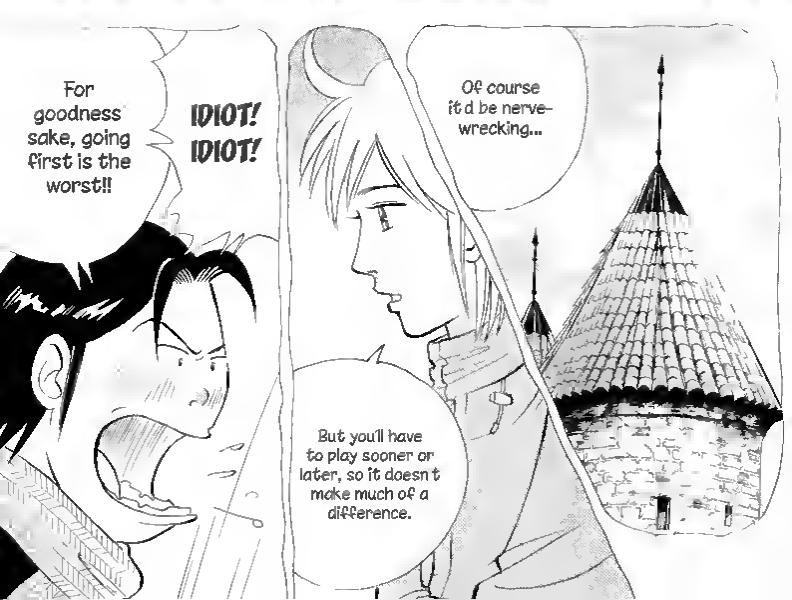
Easy Going Scans

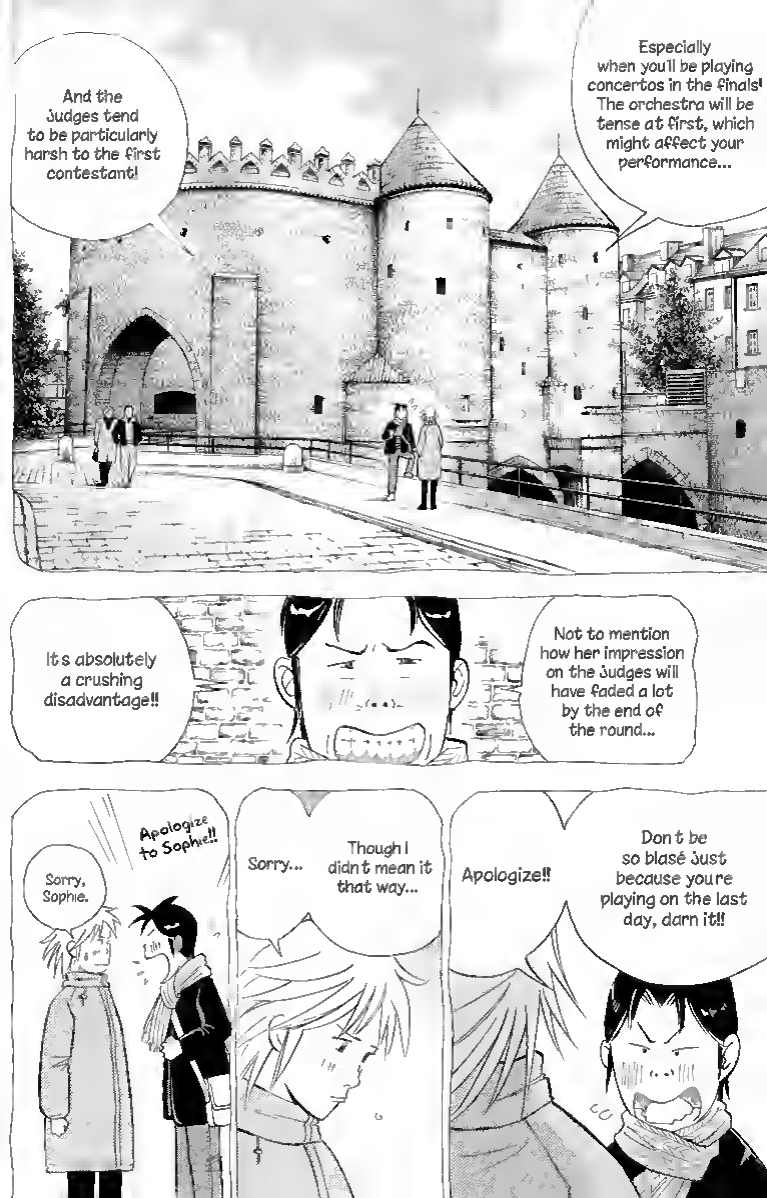
Chapter 186

What It Takes To Be A Finalist

Is splendid...
and graceful...
Sophie's performance...
To go first is a lot of pressure...
But she seems completely unperturbed...

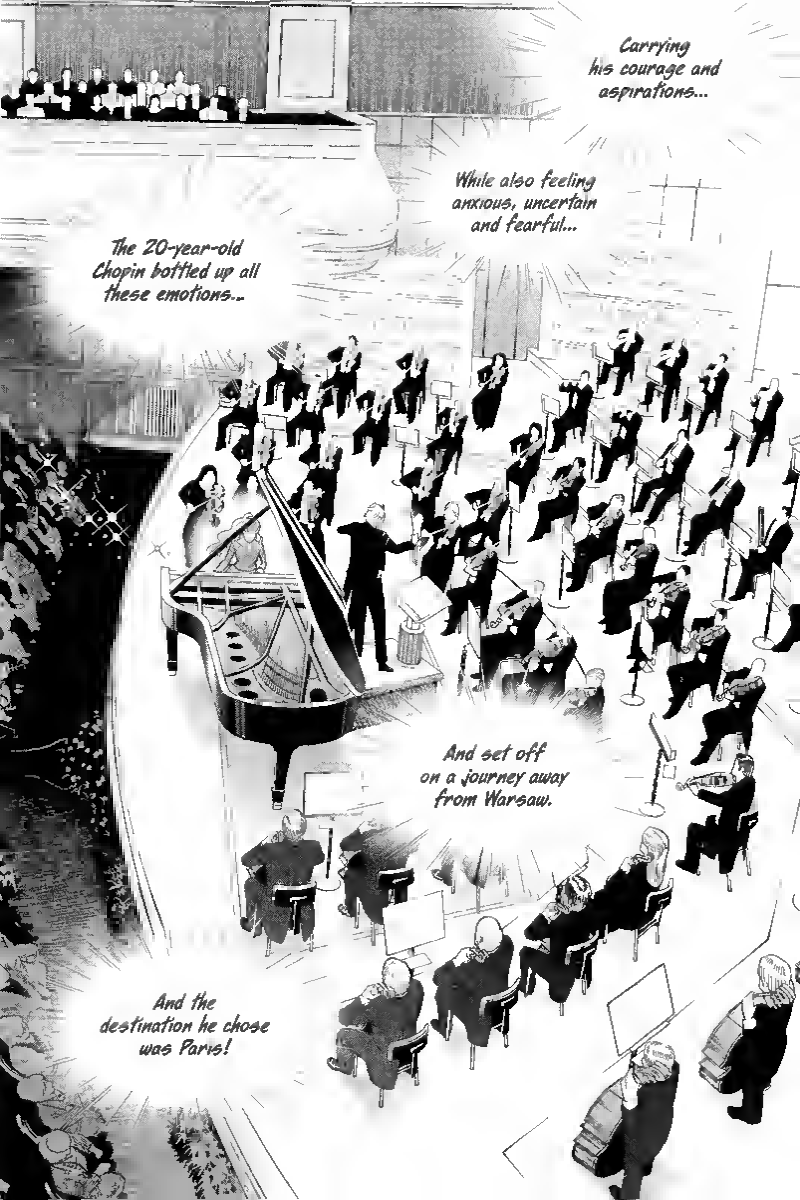
And it's so full of vigor...


For goodness sake, going first is the worst!!
IDIOT! IDIOT!
Of course it'd be nerve-wrecking...
But you'll have to play sooner or later, so it doesn't make much of a difference.


And the judges tend to be particularly harsh to the first contestant!
Especially when you'll be playing concertos in the finals! The orchestra will be tense at first, which might affect your performance...
It's absolutely a crushing disadvantage!!
Not to mention how her impression on the judges will have faded a lot by the end of the round...
Sorry, Sophie.
Apologize to Sophie!!
Sorry...
Though I didn't mean it that way...
Apologize!!
Don't be so blasé just because you're playing on the last day, darn it!!

The order in which contestants perform in the competition might really be a matter of luck.
...Makes you feel that such a thing hardly matters.
But hearing Sophie's performance...
Do even better than Kai!!!
Sophieee come onn!!

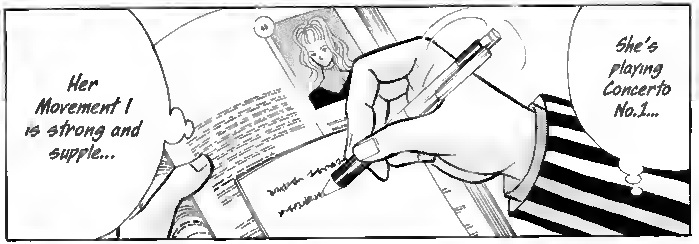
Concerto No.1 in E Minor, opus 11...
This is simply...
The perfect piece for me!
I've been...
...Working so hard to get to the finals just so I can play this piece!


Carrying his courage and aspirations...
While also feeling anxious, uncertain and fearful...
The 20-year-old Chopin bottled up all these emotions...
And set off on a journey away from Warsaw.
And the destination he chose was Paris!

That's right! Paris, capital of my country, France!
The land of Chopin's dreams!
I shall show you how Chopin thrived and bloomed in Paris through my playing!

I want to play this song before everyone else!!

Some might say it's unfortunate to be the first contestant.
But I disagree!


She's playing Concerto No.1...
Her Movement I is strong and supple...

Movement II is elegant and bright...
Under her lithe fingers, Movement III is lively and...
Or is it a tad too rapid?

No, she's feeling around for the right balance. It's all part of a musician's growth.
This exquisite imbalance of shifting between firmness and docility is most charming!

...Have only come with the intention to watch Wei Pang's performance...
I...

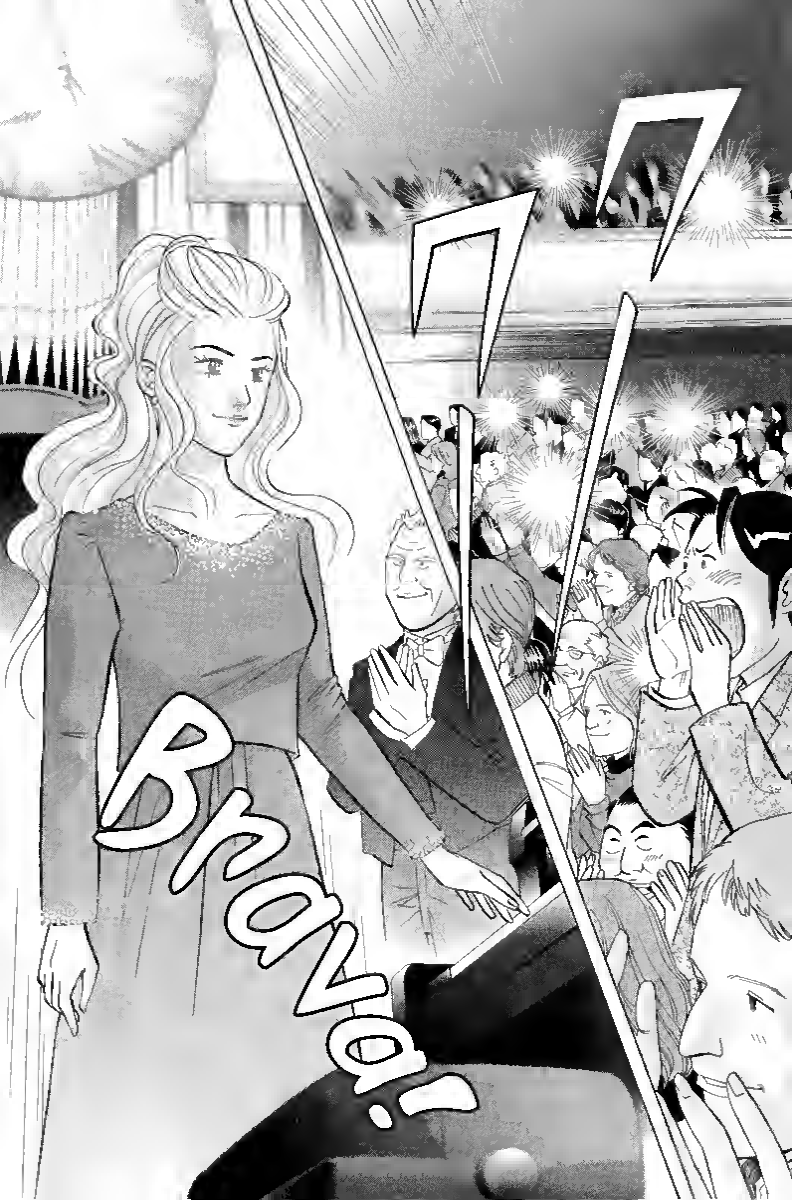
I already know...
But even without listening to his playing...

Just by playing "well"!
That one can't make it onto this stage...
I was only using this competition to beat Kai!
No matter what I try to tell myself...
I don't have what it takes to be up there...
That I hate the most.
It's spoiled weaklings like you...

I was being a self-centered brat.
I can't blame Wei Pang for cutting me down...
Pang-san, how is it that you're always so filled with confidence?
Now that I think about the not-so-pleasant conversation we had this morning...
...Standing on the edge of a cliff.
It's just so happens that I'm always...
A strange expression crossed his face when he answered.

I hear Wei Pang has returned to China because his father is in critical condition...
I wonder if he'd already been told about that back then...
Well, go back if you're happy.
To Japan or wherever.
To tell the truth, I really want to run back right now...
But I can't.

I can't go back just yet!
Because there's still something I need to do...
パラララララ


Bravo!

Ormesson was marvelous, wasn't she?
Whoaa...

It's a shame we can't listen to Wei Pang... But Aubrey Theiss is coming up next!
What are you gonna do after this, Kai?

Indeed...
We French are pretty good, eh? It's only natural that she's a big hit.

What a shame! It's Aubrey, guys...
I've already made a reservation at the Chopin Academy...
Nah. I'm going back to practise.
That'd be my idea!
Kai, what's with the hat?
He looks like Calmeras...
A disguise...
It's a disguise!
If he got recognized by his young fans, he'd never get out of signing autographs.

……

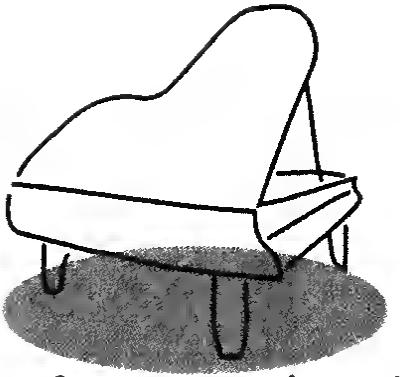
I wonder if the kid's all right...
Somehow, he seems rather down...
Hrm...
Well then. I should get going.
Have fun, you two!
...
Eh? You're sure you're not gonna stay?
Coming up next is Aubrey Theiss!
ガヤ
ガヤ

Some-thing you still need to do?
I was just thinking of having dinner with you after-wards.
Then listen in my stead, Father.
I've got something I still need to do...
Are you sure?
They say Theiss is second only to Wei Pang...
Hmm. Maybe next time.
Yesterday, I...
I'll explain everything to Father later...

I lost my temper and said something horrible to Kai...
Even if I apologize...
It'll be impossible for him to forget the whole thing...
I can't just do nothing...!!
But I...
I know it's useless...

But she isn't the only one!
I know that Aubrey Theiss is amazing...
Only the truly outstanding can make it into the finals!!
I understand now that I've heard Sophie's performance!

What It Takes To Be A Finalist END



The Perfect World of KAI

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To be continued in Volume 21

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